



Hot lead hospitality

# trouble at gunsight

Louis Trimble

First Book Publication



## DOUBLE-CROSSROADS TO THE DEVIL'S VALLEY

Cole Pender had come back to Gunsight to make a ten-year-old dream come true. He wanted to settle down on the Tepee spread, raise beef, and make a good life for himself. But his reputation as a gun-fighter had preceded him.

There was trouble in the Gunsight country, and rumors were flying that Pender had come back to add to it. Someone took the rumors seriously enough to plan an ambush for Cole. Somehow, Cole was going to have to protect himself in the manner he best knew how—with a gun—but if he did, the sheriff was ready and waiting for him with a hang rope.

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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

### **Cole Pender**

He rode into trouble and found himself the chief target of both sides.

### **Allie Callahan**

He couldn't stand to see animals mistreated, but men were different.

### **Myra Callahan**

She was even more beautiful than Cole had remembered.

### **Chad Leeman**

He wanted to continue his boyhood feud with Cole, only this time to a final showdown.

### **Sheriff Mullan**

He was old, stubborn, and determined to do his job by the book, no matter what the cost.

### **The Tejanos**

Julio, the old one, and Nito, the young hothead, shared a loyalty to Cole, a loyalty he desperately needed.

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**ACE BOOKS, INC.  
1120 Avenue of the Americas  
New York 36, N.Y.**

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**TRAIL DRIVE**

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Printed in U.S.A.

## I

COLE PENDER dropped away from his dusty position on the left flank of the small herd and rode quickly to the top of a grassy knob that thrust itself above the surrounding sageland. Knotting one end of his reins, he tossed them forward on the roan's neck so that it could dip its head to eat.

The feeling of trouble that had plagued Cole since leaving the railroad at Reno grew stronger. His gaze followed the stagecoach road down into a canyon and up across a sloping flat to the summit of the low pass that led into Gunsight Valley. The land was empty—too empty. Nothing moved but the cloud of dust covering the plodding beef. Not even a vulture showed itself against the bright blue of the late summer sky.

The expected four day drive north to the Gunsight country had stretched to five as Cole led the way more and more carefully. He checked every canyon before allowing his two Tejano hands to drive the little herd of blooded cattle down into it. He took advantage of every rise to study the stretches of sage prairie before attempting a crossing. But nothing had happened; no one had troubled them. And now with his goal less than a day's drive away, Cole still saw

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no sign that anyone was waiting to carry out the threat made against him in Reno.

With an abrupt gesture, he took the note from the pocket of his Levis and read it carefully as if he might find some extra meaning in the crude, penciled printing.

He had been given the note in a sealed envelope when he stopped at the Reno bank to complete his buying of a half interest in Carson James' Tepee spread. On the outside of the envelope there was only his name. Inside were the awkwardly printed words: "Keep yourself and that fancy beef of yours out of the Gunsight country. You won't get warned twice." There was no signature.

Cole folded away the note and studied the sprawling sagebrush landscape again. With the low pass in sight, memories tugged strongly at him. Ten years ago, as a boy of seventeen, he had spent over fourteen months in this country, working for Sim Turley's Arrow spread and for Sim's neighbors while he finished his last year of schooling. Those had been the most pleasant months of his young life, and in the bleak years that followed, he treasured his memories of that country of lush grass and never failing water.

Now he searched avidly over the fine details of the countryside, associating each one with some happening that had taken place ten years ago. He studied the canyon ahead and remembered the grass-bottomed draw cutting into it at the far end. At the back of that draw he and Chad Leeman had fought like two wild stallions, pummeling each other until from sheer exhaustion they crawled to a small spring and let the icy water revive them.

A drift of dust rising from the slowly moving herd below brought Cole back to the present. With a characteristically quick gesture, he reined the roan around and dropped back to the stagecoach road.

Old Julio was riding the right flank, well up toward the point, and Cole dropped alongside him, first drawing up his bandanna to keep the choking dust from his mouth and nose. Over the steady plodding of the tired cattle, Cole could hear Nito, the old man's grandson, singing a border love song.

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"He is young," Julio said. His eyes danced over the top of his faded red bandanna. "He is thinking of the *señoritas* waiting ahead."

"Anybody that can sing after riding five days at drag is bound to be young . . . or crazy," Cole observed dryly. He and Julio spoke Spanish to one another, both with the strong accents of the border country.

The light left Julio's eyes. "You have seen someone from up there, Señor Cole?"

"No one," Cole said shortly. He was thinking that the drive had gone too easily. No man would take the trouble to write that note and to have it delivered all the way to Reno without planning to back up his threat. And only a fool would expect the note to turn Cole back. The gunhand reputation he had built up during the lonesome years as a lawman along the border was well known in the Gunsight country. Remarks in some of Sim Turley's annual letters had told him that. No, the writer of the note would be looking for him. But the herd had passed no one save an occasional drifting rider and the stage making its run back and forth from Reno into the Oregon country.

They moved slowly over a hump and down toward the cool dimness of the canyon. Cole pointed ahead. "Where the road breaks back up to the flat, there's a box draw with water and grass enough for a day or so. We'll bed there tonight and go into the valley tomorrow."

"Ay," Julio murmured with satisfaction. "Tomorrow we will be on new grass—Tepee grass. What you think of that, cows?" His voice faded suddenly as he cut his horse back to bring a drifting young bull into line. "Soon, *becerro*, you will have food and water," he admonished.

Nodding approval at Julio's handling of the young bull, Cole rode back around the point of the herd to his position opposite the old Tejano. He sat his saddle easily, a tall man with a good part of his weight in his shoulders. Eyes the gray of campfire smoke stood out boldly against his strong, deeply tanned features. His mouth was usually quick with a

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smile, but now it was set in a harsh, taut line as he stared along the twisting, narrow canyon.

The air here was cool and damp, empty of the dust that had risen chokingly from the steadily pounding hooves. High rock walls rose sheer on either side to blot out the glare of the late summer sun. Cole dropped his bandanna and took a deep breath. The cattle were too weary to give much trouble and he worked them with only half of his attention, relaxing in spite of himself.

Cole found himself listening to the soft echoes of Nito's love song. Then suddenly the song ended, cut off by the hard, flat crack of a rifle shot. Cole heard lead scream off the rock wall by the rear of the herd and he swung his roan around sharply.

"Nito?"

"*Mira arriba!*" the boy cried. His voice was thick with excitement. Cole saw him now, head tilted upward, carbine half out of his saddle boot. Cole looked up as he had been directed. He swore angrily.

Blue sky outlined a man standing on the cliff edge. Light from the westering sun glinted on the rifle barrel in his hands. The barrel moved and a second shot struck the rock wall behind Nito, sending chips of stone screaming through the air.

Two of the cattle jumped nervously. "Watch them!" Cole commanded. "I'll take care of the joker up there." He reached for his own carbine.

It was half out of the boot when he heard, "Señor Cole!" from ahead and to his right. It was Julio, out of sight around a shallow bend, and the knife edge of shock and anger in his voice brought Cole around and driving forward.

He rounded the bend to see Julio drifting his horse, his reins held high while both hands reached for air. A short distance ahead a big man sat a stripped down saddle on a nondescript bay horse. A rifle rested almost casually across the saddle bow, the muzzle aimed unwaveringly at the old man.

Cole reined the roan in abruptly. "Slide that gun back where it belongs, Pender," the man ordered. His voice was

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thick and muffled through the bandanna he wore over his mouth and nose, but the sharp threat in his command was unmistakable.

Cole still held his carbine half out of its boot. He hesitated now, measuring the distance to the man ahead. The rifle shifted so that the muzzle pointed at the lead animals in the herd.

"Maybe you'd rather have some of your fancy beef shot?" the man said in the same heavy voice. He motioned with one hand toward the cliff top.

Cole looked upward. Two men were outlined there now, one still back even with Nito, the other forward of Cole's own position. Cole slid his carbine back into the boot and waited silently for the next move.

"Now turn that herd and drive it back where it came from!" the man ordered.

For all that he was quick to smile, Cole was not an easy going man. He had fought life too savagely for that. But in fighting, he had learned the value of patience, and he had learned to curb his natural quickness to anger. Only when he knew he was being roused would a simmering volcano of violence begin to work inside him. He felt it starting now, and he needed all of his will to force control on himself.

He kept his voice level. "This herd belongs to Tepee. And that's where it's going—now!"

"We don't want you or your beef in the Gunsight country!" the man cried. "Get moving south, fast!" The rifle muzzle lifted and steadied in warning.

Cole felt the warning note rustle in his pocket as he shifted his weight on the saddle. "You don't hear much better than you write," he giped softly.

If the man understood his meaning, he gave no sign. He simply held the rifle steadily on Cole. The herd had been drifting slowly forward, its crew moving with it, and now Cole was close enough to see how the loose, rough clothing the man wore hid his actual size, how the bandanna drawn up high and the battered hat pulled down low put even his eyes in shadow.

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"He doesn't want to risk my recognizing him," Cole realized. And he wondered who among those he knew in the valley would resent his coming so much. Chad Leeman? There was no reason Cole could think of. After their fight, he and Chad had ridden together as friends again. Allie Callahan, Myra Callahan's younger brother, still resenting the humiliation Cole had inflicted on him? Hardly. Even grown, Allie could scarcely be as large as this man ahead. Sim Turley? But Sim had been his father's friend and one time partner, and he had taken Cole in ten years ago, after his father's death and had treated him like a son of his own.

It made no difference who this man was, Cole thought savagely. No one, not even the devil himself, was going to make him turn his herd back. Not when he was so close to realizing a ten year old dream. With a quick motion, he reined the roan forward and across the leaders of the herd. He stopped near the far side of the trail so that his left side was on a direct diagonal to the man with the rifle.

The gun muzzle twitched. "That's far enough, Pender!"

Cole drifted the roan another few feet, bettering his position and putting himself well in front of the slowly moving cattle.

"I said that was far enough!"

It was far enough, Cole agreed silently. He lifted himself in the saddle and half turned as if to give orders to his two Tejanos. Both were riding with their hands held high, waiting for him to make the first move.

"All right, *amigos*," he called in Spanish. "They are only three against three."

As he turned back and dropped down, his hand slid swiftly to his hip and came up with his forty-four. He swiveled in the saddle, bringing the gun barrel up and across the horn, and fired. This was no snap shot, but a calculated move. Both Cole and his target were motionless, and the roan was set to give the angle of fire he wanted.

The man cursed in shock and surprise as the heavy slug smashed into his rifle barrel, twisting the stock violently in his hands. He still had a strong grip on the gun but he

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threw it to the side as if wanting to get rid of it. The rifle went off as it dropped, but its bullet plowed harmlessly into the dirt.

Before the echo of Cole's shot died out, the quick barking of carbine fire started up. Cole twisted around and fired at the nearer man on the cliff edge. Julio was pumping lead at the same target. The man's hat leaped off his head and he jumped backwards, out of sight.

The man down by Nito managed to slash two shots into the dirt by the boy's horse before the shattering fire of two carbines forced him away. Seeing that his Tejanos had the cliff well under control, Cole swung forward. He was in time to catch the man ahead with his handgun clearing leather.

"I wouldn't, friend," Cole said softly. The anger in him had turned icy as it so often did after the first moments of action. Now he had full control over himself; now he could act without being driven by the fierce fury of his emotions.

The man let his gun fall back and lifted his hands slowly. His heels twitched and the horse danced back a few steps. "We're not through with you, Pender," he said thickly. "You're being warned for the last time—keep out of the Gunsight country!"

He tilted his head upwards. "All right, boys, let's ride." His left hand jerked the reins suddenly. His horse stopped its dancing, swung to its right, and disappeared into a narrow cut in the canyon wall.

Julio yelled, "Ay!" in surprise, and rode forward with his carbine ready. Cole was ahead of him, but he stopped at the mouth of the cut. Horse and rider were sweeping out of sight around a bend, leaving only the echo of hoofbeats.

Cole signaled to Julio to stop. "Let him go," he ordered. "He knows this country too well to let us catch him now." He paused and added quietly, "I have the feeling we'll be seeing that hombre and his friends again."

Julio nodded and patted his rifle. Before he could answer Cole, a sudden rumble of sound echoing in the canyon turned both men toward the cattle. Nerves had finally

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broken under the battering assault of gunfire. Those to the rear were surging forward, pushing the more phlegmatic leaders toward panic. Suddenly they broke and began to lumber awkwardly up the canyon.

Fear gave them speed and they came on the dead run, horns tossing, hooves pounding, a solid wall of crazed beef sweeping down on Cole and old Julio.

### II

"THE DRAW'S just around that bend!" Cole shouted to Julio. "We'll try to turn them in there."

Both riders spurred forward. For a moment the curve in the rock wall hid them from the onrushing cattle, but their wild hammering and lowing still echoed deafeningly. Cole swung the roan about as he passed the wide mouth of the draw. At his signal, Julio kept going, making a wide turn farther up the trail and coming back down on the far side from Cole.

As the two leaders thundered close to the mouth of the draw, Julio ran his bay almost against them, the end of his lariat cracking in their faces. With agonizing slowness they began to turn away from this pressure. Now they were racing directly toward the motionless roan and the dark wall of rock behind it. As the men hoped, the open mouth of the draw caught their eyes, and with a final turning they ran wildly into it.

Cole moved in to help Julio keep pressure on the herd's flank. But it was easier now; the other cattle followed their leaders. Finally Nito appeared, working back and forth to keep the drag animals in line with the others. He disappeared into the draw and dropped his pace. Cole and Julio followed.

The draw itself ran into the hills less than a quarter of a mile before it ended in a roughly circular meadow thick with grass and cool with spring water trickling from the rock walls. By the time the men arrived, the cattle were already settled, grazing as if coming here had been their

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idea all along, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened to them.

Cole nodded as he looked around. "This is the way I remembered it," he said. "If those three come back, you can hold them off without too much trouble." He pointed to the cliff tops where great out-thrusts of rock would make it difficult for anyone to shoot down without exposing himself.

Julio let a slow smile crease his leathered countenance. "We will throw a brush fence across the draw, there where it is narrow. Then we will wait for them to try to come to us. There will be no surprises this time. They will not find us so easy as before. Eh, *chico*?"

"Sí," Nito answered. "And when they come, they will wish they had stayed far away," he added fiercely. "If it were not for those *hombres*, tonight I would be visiting the *señoritas* in the village."

Cole chuckled. "I'll tell you about them tomorrow," he said. His laughter faded. "This is a good place, but don't let that put you to sleep, *amigos*."

In a way, they were wasted words. Cole knew his two Tejanos well. They knew how to handle themselves. Both had seen their share of violence. And they were as fiercely proud of the small herd of blooded stock as he was himself. After what had happened, they would make no mistakes tonight.

"And you, Señor Cole?" Julio asked.

"I'm going into the valley to find out who wants to keep us out of this country . . . and why," Cole answered.

He walked the roan back to the stagecoach road and turned south. A short distance around the bend, he found the rifle he had shot from the man's hand. It lay close to the rock wall, apparently untouched by the wildly running cattle. Cole retrieved it and climbed back into the saddle.

It was a good gun, a Winchester Centennial Model 76, one that handled a .45-.75 cartridge. Cole saw that his .44 slug had done little damage beyond scouring the front sight. He frowned as he recalled the way the man had ap-

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peared to throw the gun down, almost as if he wanted to leave it behind. As if he wanted Cole to pick it up.

Laying the rifle across his lap, Cole started back up the canyon. He was a short distance past the mouth of the draw when he heard hoofbeats hammering down from the north. He reined up in the middle of the road, sitting quietly with one hand on the Winchester, the other resting lightly on the butt of his forty-four.

A rider swept into view, his horse at close to a full gallop. Cole stiffened as he recognized the strong, tight features of Chad Leeman. He was riding a sleek, long-legged sorrel gelding, and as he slowed, Cole saw that he still used a strong hand on the reins and still controlled his mounts with a California style Spanish spade bit.

The sight of Chad and of the way he handled his horse carried Cole back ten years, to their fight in the draw. On the surface that fight had been over Chad's treatment of Myra Callahan's younger brother, Allie, but both boys knew that jealousy over fourteen-year old Myra was the real cause.

Normally Cole never interfered in any of Allie's frequent fights. Small even for a nine year old, Allie was in constant trouble because of a strange vicious streak in his nature. But it was a viciousness directed only at people. As if seeking some kind of balance within himself, he had a deep love and concern for all four-legged animals. He often fought against cruel treatment of them, even at the risk of being soundly beaten by older boys or even men.

This day the three boys were in the draw hunting for a stray cattle. Chad, despite his fondness for fine horseflesh, grew angry with his mustang because it wanted to drink and graze after a long, hot ride. He jerked the animal's head, cutting its mouth cruelly with the Spanish spade bits he preferred even then. A small whirlwind of undersized nine-year old leaped on him, slashing with the blade of his pocket knife.

At eighteen Chad was full grown and developing into a solid, heavy muscled man. He could have picked Allie off

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himself and dropped him as he might a bug; instead he struck the boy full in the face with his fist, knocking him to the ground where he lay with his nose and lips bleeding.

Cole was slighter and shorter than Chad but he had hauled the other boy out of the saddle. They fought then until neither one was able to do more than crawl to the spring to revive themselves. Later they made up and continued to ride together.

But, Cole recalled ruefully, Allie Callahan had never so much as spoken to him again. After Chad rode away, Cole took Allie to the spring to wash off the blood. He slashed at Cole with his knife, crying in his shrill voice, "Leave me alone. I can take care of myself. I'm no baby! And keep out of my business! I'll do my own fighting." He slashed again at Cole with the small knife.

"If you don't want to be treated like a baby, stop acting like one," Cole answered. He took the knife away from the boy and turned him over his knee. It was a mild enough spanking but it turned Allie's former acceptance of Cole into hatred that lasted as long as Cole stayed in the Gunsight country.

Cole wondered what Allie would do if he could see Chad now. The big man brought the sorrel within a few feet of the roan and then reined in with a vicious twist that lifted the horse's feet high. He rammed them down again with a sharp move of his powerful wrist, leaving the sorrel trembling. He stared at Cole, the expression in his dark eyes arrogant, that of a man sure of himself and of his position in life.

Chad's gear and his clothes surprised Cole—a fancy California center-fire saddle with a high, deep-dished cantle and a slim, high horn, double rounded skirts and long tapaderos picked out here and there with gleaming silver conchos, a fancy, wide-cheeked bridle, and closed California style reins of braided horsehair with an extra length tacked on for use as a quirt. The rig, along with Chad's new California pants, a bright shirt, boots with silver threading in their tops, and a beaded vest made Chad look anything but a working cowhand.

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Cole waited for a sign of friendship. There was none. "I should have known it was you when I heard all that shooting," Chad said. His voice was deeper than Cole remembered, and it was heavy with dislike.

Chad's eyes traveled from Cole's hand resting on his gun butt to the Winchester. "My advice is for you to turn around and ride back the way you came."

Cole's smoky eyes met the dark gaze steadily. "That's the third time lately I've had that warning," he said softly. "And in about the same words."

"Say what you mean!" Chad demanded harshly.

"A note was waiting at the Reno bank, warning me to stay away from the Gunsight country," Cole answered. "This afternoon three jokers tried to ambush my herd and turn me back, with the same warning. Now you show up." His eyes raked over Chad's fancy equipment. "You're a long way from the C/L to have heard shooting from here."

Color surged into Chad's flat cheeks. He swung the sorrel to put himself broadside to Cole and reached for the gun at his hip. His hand dropped quickly away as he stared into the muzzle of Cole's forty-four.

"Don't get eager," Cole said in the same soft voice. "I've had to outdraw faster men than you just to keep alive." His tone hardened. "What are you doing in these parts right at this time?"

"I don't answer to you," Chad retorted. "What I do and where I am is my business."

"Today it's mine," Cole answered. "The leader of the ambush was a man about your size. And between the time he left here and you came, he had just about long enough to change horses and change from old clothes to fancy ones and get up on the flat where he could ride down into the canyon."

The color drained from Chad's face, leaving his lips white and thin with anger. But he made no effort to answer Cole's challenge. Instead, he said, "Everybody here knows your reputation as a gunfighter and they know what will happen

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with you back here. There hasn't been any killing so far, and we want none started!"

"What's happened in this country to make people afraid of my coming back?" Cole demanded.

"Do you think all the trouble will stop just because you and your reputation show up?" Chad shot back. "Do you think what started ten months ago will be finished because you come and put Carson James back on his feet? You fool, can't you see you'll make it worse? If all the raiders wanted was to break Carson, they'd have stopped when he had to sell his stock. But they're still hitting at the C/L. And at Arrow, so Sim claims." He paused and added heavily, "And with that fancy herd of yours here, they'll go after Tepee again. Harder this time. And what will you do?"

He threw the question out in a way that demanded an answer. Even though little of what Chad said made sense yet, Cole replied, "If you mean what will I do if Tepee is attacked—I'll fight. What would you expect me to do?"

"Fight . . . and kill," Chad cried. He thrust his head forward. "I can handle my own battles. I don't need your kind of help!"

His voice thickened with suspicion. "Or maybe I'm only supposed to think you'll try to help. Maybe there was no ambush. Maybe all of Sim's talk about not wanting you back here means nothing. Maybe you're here to help do to the C/L what's already been done to Tepee!"

Cole's bewilderment turned to anger under the goading voice. "That's a lot of maybes, Chad," he answered. "Say what you mean," he added with soft mockery of the man's own words.

"We'll see which side you're on!" Chad slashed at him. "We'll see who welcomes you back. Don't think it will be the sheriff or any decent man in the valley." He wheeled the sorrel harshly and flung back, "And don't think it will be Myra either!" Digging his sharp, seven-pointed California rowels into the animal's sleek flanks, he sent it surging forward. Before Cole could holster his gun, Chad was out of sight over the crest ahead.

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Cole sat rigidly, fighting the anger Chad had started simmering inside him. He forced himself to be calm, to try to make some sense out of Chad's words.

Slowly a pattern of meaning emerged. Raiders had hit the valley ten months ago. They had forced Carson James to sell off his Tepee herd. But that hadn't ended the trouble. The raiders were still hitting at the C/L.

If Chad could be believed, they would hit at Tepee again, now that Cole was bringing more beef onto its grass. And hit at Arrow? The full import of Chad's talk struck Cole now. He had as good as accused Sim Turley and his Arrow outfit of being behind the trouble, and of Cole being here to help Sim crush the C/L as Tepee had been crushed!

The thought of Sim Turley taking another man's land by force started Cole laughing. But the sound died in his throat. Sim had not mentioned any trouble in his annual Christmas letter. Nor had he written later to tell Cole that half of Tepee was for sale. Yet more than anyone else he knew how badly Cole wanted to return to the Gunsight country.

And now an incident that had only puzzled Cole before took on new meaning. In Reno the bank manager had told him an old roustabout from the stagecoach station had delivered the warning note. Cole had gone to the station to find the northbound stage ready to roll for the Oregon country. And he had seen Sim Turley climbing into the stage with a nod at a hawk-faced man standing close by. His shout of recognition had been loud and clear, but Sim disappeared into the stage as if he hadn't heard.

At the time, Cole had thought the noises of departure—the shouts of the driver and the roustabouts, the neighing of horses and the jangle of harness—had drowned his call. Now he wasn't as sure.

The idea of Sim Turley being the moving force behind a crew of raiders was ridiculous. But why hadn't he written asking Cole for help? Why hadn't he sent so much as a note about the sale of Tepee? And why hadn't he acknowledged Cole's shouting of his name there in Reno?

A new thought struck Cole. Why hadn't Carson James

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mentioned any trouble when he wrote with his offer to sell half of Tepee? According to what Chad had said, James had been forced to get rid of his herd well before he sent Cole his offer!

Fighting to curb his anger, Cole sent the roan forward, urging it to speed as he headed for the low pass and Gunsight Valley.

### III

THE SUN was dropping behind the crests of the western mountains by the time Cole reached the summit of the low pass. He stopped to rest the roan and to survey the valley spread out below.

Except on the far north and west sides, gently sloping sage-covered hills formed the valley's walls. On those two sides pine and spruce covered hills rose fold on fold until they became mountains that flowed toward the deep notch of Gunsight Pass. Beyond the Pass were the towering Sierra Nevadas, marking California and its still productive mother lode country.

Cole's gaze moved from the heavily timbered Arrow spread eastward to Tepee. Smaller than Arrow, it covered a belt partly in timber and partly in sage hills. And east of Tepee was the sprawling C/L, owner of the rolling sageland almost to the edge of the town of Gunsight itself.

Although ten years before Cole had lived with Sim Turley at Arrow and had worked a good deal for Carson James' Tepee, a good many of his memories were tied tightly to the C/L, owned then by the parents of Chad Leeman and Myra and Allie Callahan. Now, Cole knew from Sim Turley's letters, it belonged one-third to Chad and one-third to each of the Callahans.

The three ranches held most of the valley floor, keeping it partly in pasture and partly in hay. From here, Cole could dimly see the rising mounds of hay being stacked against the long winter feeding season, the stackers looming alongside them like great insects.

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It was darkening quickly now that the sun had disappeared, and Cole started the roan downslope. This was the stage-coach road and so it switched back and forth at an easy pitch until it reached the valley floor. Here it went straight along the base of the hills toward a distant blur marking the town.

A short distance from the foot of the pass, Cole left the road, cutting northwesterly across the grass for Sim Turley's Arrow spread. Town beckoned with its warmth and comforts, but Cole knew that he could enjoy none of those until he had talked with Sim and Carson James, until he learned why neither man had written to him of the trouble in the valley.

He let the roan have its head now and it worked over the humpy ground at a steady lope that ate up the distance. Even so, the darkness moved in more swiftly—almost too swiftly. Cole was barely able to swing the roan as a three stand barbed wire fence loomed suddenly out of the dimness. Beyond the wire, he could make out ground covered with fresh stubble and beyond that the mounds of hay bordering the road. Keeping the roan to a walk now, he rode alongside the fence, seeking a gate.

He dipped into a hollow and pulled up short. The fence was down at this point, and the way the wires trailed away from a gap halfway between two posts told him that someone had been here with a pair of cutters. He looked back at the dim shapes of cattle on the valley pasture. By morning, a good many of those cows would have found the gap and would be breakfasting off the mounds of hay. He grimaced in sympathy, thinking that Sim's men would have to leave the warmth of their quarters and come down there to work by lantern light.

Carefully picking its way through the gap, the roan started toward the nearest haystack. Cole pulled it up again, sharply this time, as three men loomed out of the dimness. The last of the evening light glinted on a gun held in the nearest man's hand.

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"You there!" the man called in a rough voice. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm heading for Arrow," Cole answered quietly.

"This is Arrow land." He rode to within a few feet of Cole, the other two men trailing a pace or so behind. "And we're Arrow," he added challengingly.

Cole's gaze traveled from the leader to the others. One was tall and lanky, a white scar standing out sharply against the dim blur that was his face. The other was small and he perched on his horse like a trained monkey. The man with the gun was bulky; in size and general build he reminded Cole of Chad Leeman.

Cole was silent, digesting the fact that this was the Arrow crew. He found it hard to believe. He recalled Sim Turley's hands as easy going, solid family men. But if he had ever seen a bunch of hardcases, this trio was it.

"I'm looking for Sim," Cole said. "I'm Pender. I just bought into Tepee."

The gun leveled at Cole remained steady. "Pender," the bulky man repeated. "We heard about you." His voice held no welcome.

"It looks like what we heard is right," the small man said in a high, thin voice. "Look at the rifle he's carrying ready to use!"

Cole had almost forgotten the Winchester. He swore at himself, realizing how this must look in a country where trouble had everyone edgy and quick with a gun.

Riddell was nodding. "I see the rifle," he said in his heavy voice. "All right, drop it. And raise your hands real easy. Smitty go get behind him. Watch for tricks."

Cole had learned long ago that fighting the world with quick, unthinking violence brought him nothing. Now he made himself pause before he acted, letting his quick mind weigh the chances and choose the one that gave him the best odds. He remained motionless a moment, keeping one hand on the Winchester, his eyes watching the small man ride a wide circle that would end at Cole's back.

Whether or not these men were Arrow, Cole had no inten-

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tion of surrendering to them. Not after the way Riddell had reacted to his name. And not after the way Chad Leeman had talked.

With a barely perceptible move of his knee, Cole swung the roan sideways, putting himself directly opposite Riddell, the muzzle of the Winchester aimed at the man's middle.

"It's an even shoot-out now," Cole said softly. "Now let's get something straight. I've been roused enough for one day. I'm riding for Arrow. You can try to stop me or you can stay alive. Take your choice."

His voice canted toward Smitty. "And you get back where you were, unless you want me to put a hole in your friend here."

Riddell let his gun muzzle droop. "Get back here Smitty." His voice was choked with anger. "We heard all about you being a professional gun, Pender. But don't think you're going to get away with that long in these parts. You—"

A rider appeared suddenly from behind the nearest haystack. He said, "He'll get away with it as long as he has to, Riddell." He rode forward, close enough for Cole to recognize his spare, wiry figure.

"Glad to see you, Carson," Cole said. "I was wondering what to do with these three."

"I been looking for you," Carson James replied. His was the first friendly voice Cole had heard since nearing the valley. "As for this outfit of sidewinders, I'd put 'em to work. There's some busted fence back of you a ways."

His old man's voice turned sharp, the way Cole remembered it. "Where you three so-called cowhands been all afternoon? I had to run cattle away from the hay three times today. I don't intend spending all night at it. This fence is on Arrow land, so get busy and string it back up!"

"Who are you to give us orders, old man?" Riddell demanded.

James ignored him. "Our haystacks and C/L's and Arrow's are all together just the way they used to be," he said to Cole. "But them cattle don't know the difference. Just

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because they come through Arrow fence don't mean they'll eat only Arrow hay."

He swung his head toward Riddell. "You know where the tools is."

Cole chuckled softly at the obvious anger of the Arrow crew. "If you need any more authority," he said, "this is it." He lifted the Winchester.

Riddell cursed, but he ordered his two men to work. He started away and stopped, staring through the darkness at Cole. "You ain't heard the last of this, Pender. Nor has that old fool partner of yours."

Cole rode closer to Carson James. "Do we stay and watch them?"

"They'll do it," James answered. "They ain't much good but they can string broken wire." He paused and added, "They've had plenty of practice lately."

James turned for the road. Cole put the roan alongside. Cole asked, "When did you say was the last time you were in this hayfield today?"

James squinted at the first stars appearing in the sky. "About two hours ago."

"And Riddell and his crew weren't here then?"

"Not then nor earlier," James answered. "What's on your mind, boy?"

Cole told him quickly about the ambush and about Chad's attempt to turn him back. James spat into the dirt of the road. "Three of 'em," he mused.

"And the leader was about Riddell's size," Cole said. "He was wearing loose clothes to hide his bulk but he couldn't change his height." He shook his head. "I couldn't prove anything, but there's a feel about Riddell—the way he sits his horse, the way he pushes forward when he talks."

"You ain't alone," James said heavily. "Plenty of folks here think them three are the raiders, and that Sim's back of the whole affair."

After Chad Leeman's remarks, Cole was not surprised. Without saying anything, he thrust the Winchester into Carson James' hands. The old man held the gun to the

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fading light. His sigh rustled into the cooling air. "That's Sim's gun. I can tell by the funny scar on the stock. This is the one you picked up on the road?"

"That's right." Cole took the gun back. "But who around here would believe that a man like Sim could turn on his neighbors?"

"Remember that Sim's got mostly timber on Arrow. For years he's run all the cows his grass could stand. So the talk is he might be hungering for a little sage graze like I got or a lot of it like the C/L has."

Despite the evidence of the Winchester or his feeling about Riddell, Cole found it hard to even think of Sim Turley as a man who would try to take over his neighbors' land. Sim had cared for him when his father died, treated him as his own son, and had been as broken up as any real father when Cole decided to go his own way.

"What does Sim say about all this talk?" Cole demanded.

"What can he say?" Carson retorted shrilly. "His crew pulled out and left in the middle of the spring after the raiders started doing some sniping. Sim claims he told his boys they had a choice—they could stay or they could pack up and go until the trouble was over. Them being family men and all, he didn't figure it was their business to get themselves hurt for Arrow.

"Anyway, according to Sim, they chose to go. The other story is he ordered 'em away. Whichever it was, he went into town and hired Riddell and Smitty and that Tige Parker for a crew. They claimed they was just drifting through after wintering in the California gold camps. They wasn't much, but Sim didn't have no choice what with all the spring work to be done."

"Does Sim think they're the raiders too?" Cole asked.

"He as good as told me and Sheriff Mullan he suspects 'em," James answered. "But like everybody else, he can't get no proof."

He added sourly, "Nobody can. They hit and run. They lay low a while and when a man's about forgotten them, they hit again. And right from the beginning they seemed to know

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where everybody's weaknesses was, where to strike so as to hurt the most. That's another thing folks point out. They figure it means the raiders are being run by someone who knows this valley real well."

"Somebody like Sim," Cole said heavily.

James' answer was a grunt. Cole added, "And most of this happened before you wrote me Tepee was for sale?"

"Most of it," James admitted. "It started late last fall—nothing big, but a lot of little things. Stock run out of the meadows and scattered in the hills before round-up. Hay-field fence cut. Then just before we had to start winter feeding, the haystacks was fired. It started in mine and spread both ways to Arrow's and the C/L's hay. The fire was put out before they lost too much. Me, I was burned out.

"And I was small. And alone. You know how I always worked, boy, running scrub stock on the little sage grass I have and the better stuff in the big mountain meadow. But with no more graze than that, I never could get big. And when you're little, you got nothing to fall back on. They broke me just by burning up my winter feed."

"Who bought your stock?"

"Sim bought the prime stuff. He offered to feed it for me on shares until spring, but I figured if he did that, the raiders would hit him harder to make sure I was completely busted, so I took what he could afford to pay. The bulls I shipped off."

His voice rose to shrill anger. "By spring the trouble was going strong. Men working the hill pastures got sniped at. Nobody was hit but the shots kept coming closer all the time. More fences was cut. Cattle was scattered all over the valley and out of it. And finally they tried setting C/L range afire after a dry spell. If that fire'd been set right, Chad and Myra would have lost a big chunk of prime grass."

He fell silent. Cole said bluntly, "That still doesn't tell me why you didn't mention the trouble in your letters."

"Boy, I wanted you here so bad it made my false teeth

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ache. So did Sim. He told me so. But what would you have done if either one of us had written the truth?"

"Come to help," Cole said.

"That's right. You'da dropped all your plans for selling that Arizona spread of yours and of buying that fancy herd and you'da come skyhooting here with your guns flapping. But once you bought into Tepee, that made things different. Now you got a stake in this valley. Now you carry some weight, and you got a right to do something about them raiders."

"And Sim feels the same way now?" Cole asked heavily.

"He's acting like an old maid," Carson James answered. "Lots of folks here remember you was a hothead as a kid. That and the reputation you got as a gunslinger's made most of 'em think you'll start shooting up Sim's crew the minute you hit the valley. There ain't been no killing yet, and folks are afraid you'll start it. And then it won't be easy to stop. Sim's heard so much of this kind of talk, he's got to believing it himself."

"If he is behind the raiders, that would be a good reason for his not wanting me here," Cole said.

"He ain't and don't you go thinking he is!" James cried at him. "You know Sim well enough, boy. He's had his share of trouble, more'n the C/L when you start adding up the score."

"If it isn't Sim wanting more grass, who is it? And what do they want?" Cole demanded.

"Nobody knows," James replied flatly. "Look at me and look at Arrow. What little grass we got ain't worth stealing. The C/L graze is good enough, but there's just as good and better held by all them little ranchers across the valley. If anyone wants grass so bad, why not run them out? It'd be easier. They'd go quick."

They were opposite the rutted track running up to Tepee. James swung his horse to the left. "You coming to bunk with me tonight?"

"I've got a few people to see," Cole replied. "I'll bunk in town tonight and ride out early for the herd."

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"If you're looking for Sim, he's gone to town," James said. "And before you go believing anything bad about Sim, listen to what he's got to say. And don't let loose too fast on other folks yet, neither. Like I said, they're half scared you'll start a war."

"I won't hunt trouble, but I won't run from it," Cole said.

"Nobody's been running!" Carson snapped. "But we can't fight what we don't see. We ain't got an army here to keep watch on our cows and hay and fences all the time."

In his excitable way, he began shaking his finger at Cole. "Just remember, boy, there ain't been this kind of trouble in the valley—ever. People here ain't used to violence. They don't know what to do with it. Hell, what's Sheriff Mullan ever done but run a Saturday night drunk in now and then? So go easy on folks when they start talking foolishness."

He rode a short distance and called back. "What I said don't go for Allie Callahan. That little devil's been made part time deputy sheriff. And ever since he heard you was coming back, he's been practicing his draw and sharpening his knifel"

### IV

COLE WAS surprised to find that Gunsight had changed little since he left. The Callahan House was still the biggest structure, a two story frame building with a wide veranda extending from the brightly lighted lobby out over the board sidewalk. A weed grown vacant lot separated the hotel from the town office and the jailhouse, and across the street Healy's Saloon threw yellow light onto the dust of the street.

Tying the roan in front of the hotel, Cole beat futilely at the trail dust on his jeans and went into the lobby. It was empty except for a lone clerk yawning behind the desk. He nodded as Cole came forward.

"I need a place for my horse, a room, a bath, and a meal."

The clerk showed white, even teeth. "The Callahan House

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provides every convenience, sir. The stable is across the alley to the rear. You'll find the bath—"

"I know my way around," Cole interrupted. He laid a gold eagle on the desk, reached for the register and the pen standing in its glass of shot, and signed his name.

The clerk laid a key and change on the register. "Dinner will still be served for another hour, Mr. ah-h . . ." He turned the book around and glanced at the neat signature. His smile slipped sideways and disappeared. ". . . Mr. Pender," he finished in a strained voice.

Cole pocketed his change and the key. "Don't worry," he said dryly. "I won't shoot up the place tonight." He took a step away. "Has Sim Turley been in?"

Worry touched the clerk's eyes. Cole said harshly, "I'm an old friend of his."

"He's probably gone over to Healy's," the clerk said faintly. "He usually plays cards there."

Cole nodded and returned to the roan. He rode it to the corner and east along the town's one cross street until he came to the alley running behind the hotel. Here was the stable, and he turned the horse over to a sleepy-eyed boy.

"Give him a good rubdown and an extra dollop of oats," Cole instructed. Taking his saddlebags, he crossed the alley and entered the hotel through its rear door. On his right, stairs went up to the second floor; on his left, a doorway led to the baths behind the kitchen.

The bath was good, with all the hot water Cole wanted, and a tub big enough to stretch out in. He followed it with a quick shave, put on fresh clothes, and went upstairs to his room near the end of the hall. It was small but comfortably furnished, with the lone window opening onto the alley. Dropping his saddlebags, he used the front stairs to reach the lobby and the saloon bar.

Downing a quick whiskey in the quiet, empty room, he crossed the lobby to the brightly lighted dining room. A half dozen people were there, clustered at two tables. Cole caught quick, inquisitive glances from half remembered faces. He saw signs of recognition and then a quick turning

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away to avoid giving him a welcome. Choosing a side table, he sat down, placing his hat on the floor.

He ordered stew from a buxom waitress and leaned back, trying to ignore the lump of cold anger that had settled heavily inside him. He began to regret his choice of eating places, not wanting to face hostility from Myra Callahan tonight.

He was nearly finished with his meal when he saw her. She came to the door of the dining room. A man joined her and memory jolted through Cole. It was the tall, hawk-faced man he had seen only five days ago in Reno, the man who had been standing by the stage when Sim Turley got on.

And now he was here, looking at Cole and then down at Myra, murmuring something to her. She answered and gave a brief shake of her head. The man turned back to the lobby and Myra came slowly toward Cole's table.

She was a tall woman with glossy black hair worn to reveal the fine shape of her head. Her features were in the classic mold, holding a beauty that just missed being arrogant. Watching her make her way gracefully toward him, Cole realized that the pretty girl he remembered had become a strikingly beautiful woman.

She reached his table. "Hello, Cole." Her voice was deep and soft, and he found a guarded reserve in it. Her expression caught the same reserve, but he saw a glow of welcome deep in her dark eyes.

He started to rise and she said quickly, "Please don't get up." Her glance touched his clothes, lingering where his coat bulged over his gun.

Before he could speak, she added softly, "Please come and talk after I'm through this evening. I live in the same place."

"I remember," Cole said. "I'll be along."

She turned quickly away, crossing the room to speak to the customers at the other tables. Cole frowned at her withdrawn attitude. It was as if she hadn't wanted her welcoming of him to be seen and so had kept it hidden deep in her eyes.

Annoyed now despite Carson James' cautioning words,

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Cole picked up his hat and left without waiting for his after-dinner coffee and cigaret. He was striding through the lobby when the hawk-faced man rose from a settee and intercepted him.

"Pender?"

Cole stopped. "I'm Raul Horneman," the man said. He held out a firm hand. "I heard you were bringing some blooded beef into the valley. I'd appreciate a chance to look them over some time."

Cole's puzzlement was obvious. Horneman went on, "I used to be a cattle buyer with the railroad. I've retired here but I imagine I'll be doing some buying and selling now and then to keep my hand in."

Cattle buying must pay well if a man Horneman's age could retire, Cole thought. A scattering of gray threaded the dark hair at his temples and through his mustache, but he was obviously well under forty. He was a tall man, finely muscled, and well tanned as if he spent a good deal of his time out of doors.

"The herd will be at Tepee tomorrow," Cole said. "You're welcome to a look."

"I'll ride that way soon," Horneman answered. There was an easy charm about him that Cole felt even through his preoccupation. He had a mouth that caught and held a smile easily, and his gaze was open and frank. With a pleasant nod, he turned away, leaving Cole free to go on.

It was in Cole's mind to go to Healy's saloon, both to find Sim Turley and to hear what Healy had to say. He recalled a wag long ago remarking that as long as Gunsight had Healy it needed no newspaper.

Cole was halfway across the street when the saloon doors swung open and two men came rapidly out. Cole recognized the spare, whipcord figure of Sim Turley. Riddell was beside him, working hard to match Sim's long stride. They made for the horses tied at the hitching rail.

Cole shouted, "Sim!" and knew that this time there was no noise to keep the older man from hearing him.

Sim Turley stopped with one foot in the stirrup. He

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twisted his head toward Cole, then mounted and settled into the saddle. Cole reached him and he thrust out a work-hardened hand diffidently, as if half expecting Cole to refuse it.

Cole felt the diffidence and let Sim's hand drop. Sim said, "It's good to see you, son. Come in tomorrow after you get the herd in the meadow." His eyes pleaded for understanding.

He lifted the reins, making his horse dance back. "Right now I got me a problem." Pulling the horse around, he laid heels to it, sending it spurting out of the light and into darkness. Cole caught a fleeting glimpse of Riddell's grin mocking him and then he, too, was gone.

Cole was too surprised to more than stand and stare after the running horses. Then with a grunted curse of bewilderment, he turned toward Healy's Saloon. Maybe he could find out inside what was bothering Sim. If not, he'd find out tomorrow. He wanted to go to Arrow now, but memory of the look in Sim's eyes held him back. He crossed the board sidewalk and pushed savagely at the batwing doors.

Cole remembered Healy as a long-jawed man with a bushy brown mustache and thinning red hair. And again he found things little different from his earlier memories: the big room running deep to the rear, the green-topped poker tables and pool tables, the mahogany bar still too short for the number of customers wanting to use it. And Healy, mustache a little heavier, hair a little thinner, serving liquor in his unhurried way, always finding time to stand and talk.

Cole stayed inside the doors, letting his eyes roam around the room. Two games of cowboy pool were going on and three of the poker tables were in use. Half a dozen men were lined up at the bar. Cole recognized a good many faces although he could not put names to them all. He received a few nods of greeting, but no one called out his name. He felt more of a watchfulness, of a silent waiting than he did hostility as he walked forward to an empty spot in the middle of the bar.

From this position he could see Chad Leeman at the nearest

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poker table. Chad lifted his head, stared at him without expression, and went back to his cards. Cole turned and signalled Healy for a glass of whiskey.

Healy came up, grinning openly. "Glad to see you back, Cole."

"That makes you a minority," Cole said pleasantly.

Healy kept his grin. His agate blue eyes were genuinely friendly as he poured Cole's drink. "Don't let it bother you. They'll come around after a while."

"Who's *they*?" Cole asked bluntly. He took out his tobacco and shaped a cigaret while he waited for Healy's answer. "Sim?" he prodded.

"Sim just left," Healy said. "That so-called ramrod of his came and got him."

"I saw Sim outside," Cole interrupted.

Healy leaned forward eagerly. "Did he say what the trouble was this time?"

Cole wanted to get information, not give it. "Not to me," he replied shortly. "Nor to the sheriff. He rode right past the jailhouse."

Healy's expression registered disapproval. "There are some say Sim makes his own trouble so he won't—"

"I've heard," Cole cut him off.

"It hasn't been proved," Healy said. "And it ain't going to be. That kind of loose talk is like the other going around, how you're going to bring trouble into the valley and what's going to be done to stop you."

His indignation was genuine, Cole realized, but that didn't stop him from enjoying being able to pass on gossip. Cole encouraged him. "Done by who—deputy sheriff Allie Callahan?"

"You heard that too?" Healy sounded disappointed.

"I've been warned," Cole said dryly.

Healy made it plain whose side he was on. "Just remember that Allie only wears that star from supper time Friday through Sunday. And that it doesn't give him any special rights."

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"I worked for the law long enough to know how much power it has," Cole answered.

Healy turned away to serve another customer. Cole emptied his glass and glanced around, noticing that he was being pointedly ignored by most of the men in the room. Then a bandy-legged cowboy left one of the pool tables and came directly toward him. He recognized Shorty French, the little ramrod of the C/L.

Shorty French said in a clear, loud voice, "Howdy, Cole. I hear you're bringing some blooded beef into the valley. Drop around soon and let's talk about us paying stud on one of your bulls. The C/L could sure use some new blood."

He walked on with his rolling gait. Cole saw that Chad was watching, his expression tight and icy. The insult against his management of the C/L had been obvious and brutal. Cole was surprised to hear it come from Shorty French. Chad might be only a one-third owner of the ranch, and so pay only one-third of the little foreman's wages, but unless things had changed the Callahans had always left the running of the spread to the Leemans.

That meant Shorty could be risking his job by openly siding with Cole. Healy and now Shorty French, Cole thought. But how much force would they be if it came to a showdown against Chad . . . and how many others?

The batwing doors swung open again and Raul Horneman came in. He nodded pleasantly to Cole and went on to the poker table where Chad played. Cole turned to Healy, pushing his glass forward for a refill.

"Tell me about this Horneman," Cole said.

Healy poured Cole's drink and drew a beer for himself. "He showed up here first about two years ago, buying cattle for the railroad. He came off and on until this summer, when he decided to settle here. Says he's retiring. I figure that means he's got time to spark Myra Callahan."

"What else does he do?" Cole asked dryly.

"He rides a lot," Healy answered. He looked thoughtfully into his beer. "If you're thinking he's got something to do with the trouble, forget it. Sheriff Mullan's looked him

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over pretty close. So have a lot of other people." He shook his head. "Don't forget the C/L's been hit pretty hard too. And when a man's trying like billy-o to marry a girl, he isn't likely to try to ruin a good part of her income."

Healy had the look of a man who was going to move from an answer to Cole's question into rambling gossip. Cole was tired of Healy's talking now that it had reached this stage. He said abruptly, "I wasn't thinking of him or anybody else as having anything to do with the trouble. Not yet."

Two men came in, taking places on Cole's left, and Healy moved off to serve them. Cole slid down the bar to accommodate the pair, putting himself tight against the man on his right. Now he had to suck himself in a little to raise his glass to his mouth.

The batwing doors groaned open and heavy feet hammered on the sawdust littered floor. A voice, reaching for a man's depth but not quite making it, ordered, "Fetch me a drink, Healy!"

Suddenly a shoulder jabbed between Cole and the man tight to him on the right. Cole's glass was halfway to his mouth and the jolt sent whiskey spilling over his hand and down onto the bar.

Cole twisted his head to look down into a face that matched the voice—almost a man's face but one not fully matured. The classic features were still soft with boyishness, the whiskers more downy than bristly. The eyes alone held little youth. They were surly and ugly with the hatred they threw at Cole.

## V

THIS WAS Allie Callahan. Even pitched up on high-heeled boots, he couldn't get the top of his head as high as Cole's chin. His bones were fine and delicate and held barely enough meat to cover them. The full-sized gun and belt dragging at his hip made him look like a small boy playing grown-up.

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Cole said softly, "Hello Allie. If you'd ask proper, I'd be glad to squeeze out a little room for you."

Allie's bow-shaped mouth tried to twist into a cold sneer. He swung his thin shoulder again in an effort to wedge his body between Cole and the next man. "You been here long enough," he said to Cole. "Step aside and let a man have his drink."

Cole could feel the silence in the saloon thicken. Men began to drift away from the bar, leaving space enough for a half dozen Allie Callahans. But he remained where he was, his shoulder digging at Cole.

Cole said loudly, "When you grow up to be a man, maybe I will step aside."

He heard the harsh suction of Allie's breath and knew that he had touched what was still the boy's sorest spot. He added flatly, "And you owe me a drink."

Allie made an ugly sound in his throat. Color surged into his thin cheeks and drained from around his lips. "Move!" he ordered in a strangled voice.

"I told you ten years back I don't fight with children," Cole replied. "That still holds."

He felt Allie's quick backward step and guessed what was coming. He matched the move with one of his own, coming around with his back to the bar and both hands free. Allie was pawing for his gun, his dark eyes blazing with wild anger.

Cole lifted his right hand. Allie's arm came up in an instinctive gesture to slap the hand away. Cole's left darted out, the fingers clamping over Allie's gunwrist. He squeezed. Allie's mouth came open in pain and surprise. He jerked upward to free his gun. But Cole's grip was hard and unyielding. The gun might have been glued in its holster.

Cole said with soft mockery, "If you want to draw so bad, I'll help." He pulled up on Allie's wrist, bringing the gun free. The butt began to slide from Allie's numbed fingers. Cole caught the .44 easily and laid it on the bar behind him.

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"When you grow up, you can have it back," he said in the same soft tone.

Allie's breath came sobbingly from his open mouth. He began to curse Cole in a low, gasping voice. Cole opened his hand and Allie stumbled back, rubbing his wrist.

Cole stepped to the bar. "I'll take that drink now," he said to Healy. "Put it on Allie's bill."

The bottle shook a little as Healy filled Cole's glass. "Take it easy," Cole said lightly. "He isn't the law until Friday night."

"It isn't that," Healy said faintly. "But Allie hasn't been made to look so bad since his pa whipped him in public eight years ago. The next day he tried to run his pa down with a horse. The Lord knows what he'll do this time."

Cole found out what Allie intended to do. A thin sound of boot-sole scraping on sawdust cut into the silence. Cole glanced up at the small bar mirror to his left and behind Healy. He had a glimpse of a piece of Allie, enough to show him the contorted face of someone beyond thought, beyond control. And to show him the light glinting from the blued steel of a knifeblade.

Allie lunged. Cole heard Horneman's precise tones, "Watch yourself, Pender!" and wondered if the man had deliberately held back his warning until it was almost too late.

With the lunge, Cole stepped aside, letting the blade drive past his side and deep into the wood of the bar. He moved like a dancer, to his left, spinning around so that he stopped in back of Allie. He put both hands on the boy's shoulders and pulled. Allie staggered backwards, leaving the knife still in the bar.

"How many toys do I have to take away from you in one night?" Cole demanded with icy contempt.

Allie stared at him, the whiteness around his lips making him look like a dying man. "I spanked you once," Cole went on. "I can do the same thing again."

Allie stood a half dozen paces away, his eyes dulled, his mouth working. Cole stepped to the bar, pulled the knife free, and laid it by the gun.

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"Go home to bed!"

Allie made a gargling sound of rage. "I'll get you, Cole! So help me, I'll get you!" he screamed. Head down, he plunged through the doors and into the street, as if he could outrun his humiliation.

Healy let out a slow breath. "You didn't do yourself any good," he said to Cole.

"That wasn't my intention," Cole answered.

Healy sighed. "Everybody hoped making Allie Sheriff Mullan's deputy would do him some good, tone him down. For a time it looked that way." He broke off suddenly.

"Until I got back," Cole finished for him.

Healy looked unhappy. "Allie plain hates you, Cole."

"He'll have to learn to live with it," Cole said, Picking up the gun and knife, he nodded good night. Healy made no move to call him back even though his drink sat untouched on the bar. Healy drained the glass himself and walked away, his head shaking worriedly.

The sounds in the saloon were normal again as Cole pushed his way through the doors. That would be the way of it for a while, he thought. People would be wary as long as he was around; once he was out of sight, they would do their best to pretend he didn't exist. It had been that way at times along the border where he came in to be the law. Until people learned he fought no more than he had to, killed only when driven to it, they walked a wide circle around him. He stood a moment now on the deserted board sidewalk. Then, his mind made up, he walked purposefully across the street and through the vacant lot to the alley running behind the hotel. Here, on the near corner of the building, twin windows threw light onto the ground. Between the windows was the door Cole sought. It led into the big apartment where the Callahans had lived since coming to Gunsight. Cole knocked softly.

He heard Myra's footsteps, light and quick. He felt his throat go dry, and the sudden hammering of blood in his ears drowned out all other sounds. The gun and knife suddenly weighed heavily in his hand, and he had a brief

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desire to throw them aside. Before coming back to Gunsight, he had schooled himself to treat Myra as he would anyone else he hadn't seen for ten years. And earlier this evening, he had managed to hold himself in check. But now the thought of seeing her alone brought back the dreams and hopes of the lonely years. He was almost afraid to meet her with the proof of Allie's humiliation in his hand. But he knew that she would hear of the fight soon enough. He held onto the gun and the knife.

The door opened. She stood framed in the lamplight, her expression calm, her dark eyes revealing nothing to him. "Come in, please."

He stepped inside, feeling like a complete stranger. He removed his hat while she shut the door. Then he thrust the gun and knife at her, wanting to get this over with.

"These belong to Allie," he said flatly. "I had to take them away from him at Healy's."

She set them on a table. "I'm not surprised," she said in her rich voice. It took on a note of weariness. "I suppose you made a fool of him in front of a lot of people."

"No," Cole said. "He made a fool of himself." He added honestly, "But I didn't make it any easier for him."

"I'm not surprised at that either," Myra answered.

Cole waved the subject aside. "But you didn't ask me here to talk about Allie."

"In part," Myra said. "To warn you about the way he feels." She made a futile effort to smile. "But it seems I'm a little late."

She was as taut as a lariat on a wild steer, Cole thought. Whatever her main reason for asking him here, she was finding difficulty in talking about it.

She drew a deep, steadying breath, then began to speak. Her words came out in a rush. "I agreed to help them get you to go away. I thought I could. But . . . I want you to stay!"

"Even after what happened tonight with Allie?" he asked softly.

"When I first heard you were coming back, I was glad,"

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she said. "Then I became afraid. For you, not of you. Because of Allie's attitude and because of what they kept telling me would happen."

Cole waited silently for her to go on. She stood before him, still taut, her dark eyes pleading for his understanding. "I had myself completely convinced you should go, until I saw you tonight."

Her voice broke. "Cole! Oh, Cole!" And she was in his arms. They had kissed good-bye when he left, a shy touching of the lips. But now her kiss was a woman's, strong, almost frightening in its intensity. She held herself tightly to him and then pulled back sharply.

"Ten years," she murmured. "Sometimes it seemed forever. I waited and waited. I gave you up and then . . . now I'm terribly confused."

"You've promised yourself to this Raul Horneman?" he asked bluntly.

"No," she answered in a steadier voice. "Not yet. He's very attentive. And he's a fine person. He—" She broke off, obviously not wanting to discuss Horneman now.

"What are you going to do?" she asked abruptly. "What if they are right and the trouble gets worse because you're here?"

"Who is *they*?" Cole demanded. "Who started you thinking like this—Chad, the sheriff, Sim?"

"All of them at one time or another, I suppose," she said. She sounded very tired now. "At first, Sim wanted you here. But he's like the sheriff—he's getting old. And those stories about him and his crew being behind the trouble have frightened him."

Cole caught her hands in his. Her fingers were icy, lifeless. "You don't think Sim's guilty?"

"Do you?" she cried.

"It's a hard thing to believe," Cole admitted. Quickly, he told her of seeing Sim in Reno, of the warning note, and of the ambush on the trail.

"I'm pretty sure the three at the ambush were Arrow,"

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Cole said, "And a gun they left behind belongs to Sim, so Carson says."

"And you think that Sim went to Reno to deliver that note?" she demanded. "That he doesn't want you here because he is behind the trouble?"

Cole smiled without humor. "Today Chad accused me of coming to help Sim break the C/L."

"Chad Leeman is a fool!" she cried. "I don't care what he claims, what half the people here say. I've known Sim Turley all my life. When Dad died, he was the one who came forward to help us. Since I can remember, whenever I've had a problem, it was Sim I could take it to."

"And you know him too," she rushed on. "How could a man like Sim do such things?"

"I'm not accusing him," Cole said. "But I want to talk to him, if he'll ever hold still long enough." He told her about his brief meeting earlier with Sim Turley.

"That was my doing," Myra admitted. "I told him to let me talk to you first, to go if he heard you were in town."

Cole nodded. "So when Riddell came and told him he saw me heading this way, Sim left." His eyes were steady on hers. "Did you really think I'd go, Myra?"

"Not really," she admitted. "But I knew I had to try. I kept thinking that you wouldn't fight blindly like everyone else has. You've lived with violence. You'll try to hunt them down—and you could be killed!"

"I won't fight for the sake of fighting," Cole answered. "If I'm hit, I'll hit back. But I won't go looking for trouble."

He dropped her still icy hands. "Tell Allie that. And the sheriff."

She nodded. "There aren't many people here who'd help you," she said in a low voice. "But Shorty will—he knows how I feel. And Raul too."

"Horneman will help me, or he knows how you feel about me?"

"Both," she said simply. She took quick steps to the door. "Please go now, Cole. I . . . I'm not sure just how I do feel. I want to think, and I can't with you here."

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Cole picked up his hat. "I didn't intend for things to go so far between us. Not while there's still this trouble." He opened the door and moved to the small step outside.

"Talk to Sim before you do anything," she pleaded. Then almost sharply, she whispered "Good night" and shut the door against him.

He slipped into the cool darkness of the alley and hurried to the rear lobby door and up to his room. He started for the lamp he recalled being on the dresser. The room was dark, with only starlight coming through the lone window. He reached for a match as he walked.

He was almost to the dresser when he heard the sounds—the attempted stilling of a nervous breath, the light scrape of a bootsole on the carpeting. He twisted about and dropped into a crouch. The darkness was broken by the mass of a body hurtling toward him, cutting across the thin starlight framed in the window. The body was aiming for him at face level. As it reached him, he drove upward with a powerful thrust of his legs, digging his shoulder into a hard, flat belly.

His attacker went into the air, riding on Cole's shoulder. He flailed out and something hard slashed viciously at the side of Cole's head. It struck his hat and slid numbly against his neck. The blow sent Cole to one knee, dropping the attacker with him.

He felt the other twist free and stumble back. Shaking his head, Cole reached and caught a handful of shirtfront. The numbness was leaving him, letting his strength come back. He jerked backwards and threw a fist at the dim blur marking the attacker's face. Knuckles cracked viciously on flesh thin over sharp bone. The attacker cried out and went backward. He struck the edge of the bed and rolled to the floor. He lay without moving.

Panting, Cole rose and stood a moment until a last wave of dizziness passed. He struck a match. As he expected, this was Allie. His eyes were closed and a trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth. He breathed raggedly but steadily. Cole lit the lamp and bent to make a more thorough examination.

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Allie wasn't badly hurt, he decided. The soft edge of the bed had saved his head from a nasty crack. But he was deep in darkness, and Cole guessed he would be there for some time.

He looked at the heavy piece of wood, the sawed off butt end of a pool cue, that Allie had struck him with. Anger surged up, mixed with weary compassion. He dreaded the idea of taking Allie down to Myra. Then it occurred to him that Allie might not live with her. As a "man" he would hardly want to. Quickly Cole went through Allie's pockets. He found what he hoped for, a key to one of the hotel rooms.

Bending, he scooped Allie up on his shoulder, carried him down the hall, and into his room. He dropped Allie on the bed, stayed long enough to peel off the boy's boots and vest, and then left quietly.

Cole found himself bone tired. He locked his door and propped a chair under the latch. He undressed slowly, moving as if he had been drugged. Blowing out the lamp, he crawled into bed and lay there, not finding the sleep he expected.

He thought, This was the old pattern. He had known it when he was mining, and when he was a lawman—sleep with one ear open and your feelers out.

Then sleep caught him before the thought could be fully completed. He sank into it, half roused himself long enough to wonder if he had remembered to hang his holster on a bedpost close to his hand, and slept again before he could answer his own question.

## VI

ALLIE CALLAHAN rode north out of town under the bright glare of the morning sun. None of the few people on the street bothered more than to glance casually his way. He glared at them angrily. By God, someday the people in this town would look at him! Someday they'd stop sniggering behind their hands and stop thinking of him as "that kid who lived off his sister." Allie was sure they talked about him

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that way; he could feel it. They thought he was still a kid living in Myra's shadow. They never thought of him as a man who could make his own way through life.

Not even Myra thought of him that way. And she should know better. He slapped the heel of his hand against the butt of his gun. The way she had looked when she gave the gun and knife back to him this morning! He'd make her regret that look. And it wouldn't be long either. What she didn't know, what none of the people in Gunsight knew, was that he had plans. Big plans. And if he played his cards right, he'd make them admit he was a man who could handle himself.

He rode on, half immersed in his dreams, half aware of the paint pony under him. It jumped a little, wanting to take the kinks out of its muscles after a long night in the stable. Allie grinned and patted the horse affectionately. "Loosen up slow, fellow," he said in a crooning voice.

The paint bucked easily a few times and did a stiff-legged dance. Allie pulled him down with a gentle but firm hand. "We'll warm you up when we leave town."

Once they were in the open, he let the paint have its run, guiding it only so that it took a trail leading into the sage hills on the nearer edge of the C/L.

The paint pony was Allie's pride. He had got it by his own sweat, catching it from a wild bunch and breaking it to suit himself. That breaking had been a slow, careful process that left the horse manageable by Allie but still with the spirit of its wild days.

Allie didn't like the way most men broke their riding stock. The cruel methods they used in the name of having to hurry angered him. Until he learned better, he had tried taking that anger out on men with his futile fists or, if he was wild enough, with his knife. He could never remember having wanted to do the same toward an animal, not even the most stubborn one.

It was this streak in him that Myra had patiently tried to turn toward his own kind. "Men can think," Allie answered her. "Animals can too, but not in the same way. Men are

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deliberately cruel; an animal never is. When people start acting more like a good horse, then I'll start treating them the way they deserve."

He was in a hurry now but when the trail grew steep he made the paint walk, not letting it wear itself out by its own eagerness. He rode the sage hills, fold on fold, until he was on the highest ridge and able to look northward to the great desert flat stretching out around an alkali sink and on toward the Oregon border. He went west along the ridge until the trail dropped back toward the valley.

From here he could make out tiny dots working in the hay meadows. Those would be the C/L hands down there, out of the way so he needn't fear running into them. Not that it would matter usually—this ranch was a third his—but he had business he wanted kept secret today.

The trail dropped quickly, past a small, spring-watered meadow, past a lineshack and on down to the clutter of buildings marking the C/L home ranch. Cottonwoods grew along a creek here and he rode into their screen. From the edge of the trees he could see Chad Leeman walking away from the corral. Allie screwed up his face and made the raucous call of a mountain jay three times. Chad broke his stride, glanced around, and then drifted toward the cottonwoods.

As Chad came into the protection of the trees, Allie saw that he had dirt on his jeans and a bruise on one cheek. Allie said with soft maliciousness, "You ever going to learn how to break a horse without getting knocked around? Maybe you should wear them fancy California duds. They ought to impress a horse."

Chad looked coldly at him. "Your face looks like you ran into something tougher than a bronc." He scowled. "Another run in with Cole?"

Allie looked sour. Chad said, "That was a damn fool thing you did at Healy's last night."

"You told me to roust him some," Allie answered sullenly.

"I didn't tell you to go that far. Nor to brace him again later and get yourself beat up," Chad retorted. "Everybody

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knows how you feel about Cole. After last night, if anything happens to him, you'll be the one they lay the blame to."

He squatted down and began to shape a cigaret. "All I want you to do with Cole is keep him thinking about you, worrying about you being on his back. Then when he is hit, he'll be looking the wrong way. By the time he figures out you aren't the one to be concerned with, it'll be too late—for him."

"It's too late now," Allie cried impatiently. "We been at this almost a year and what have we got? You were going to drive Carson to the wall and buy him up. And then do the same with Arrow and the C/L. But you kept pussyfooting around until that old fool Carson sold half his place to Cole. Now he'll throw in with Sim and help Arrow out too."

He snorted angrily. "More than likely, he'll try to help Myra save the C/L. He and that slicker Horneman."

"I'll take care of the C/L," Chad replied. "And don't be too sure about Cole's helping Arrow. He's had an earful of that talk about Sim being back of the trouble. And once he's sure Riddell and the boys have been doing most of the raiding, he'll start doing some thinking about Sim."

Allie said stubbornly, "You're wishing. You won't break Cole by fence cutting and hay burning."

"I've got a way to take care of Cole," Chad said with vicious softness. "You let me do this my way. When we get through we'll own Gunsight Valley. But I told you before, we have to do it in a way that won't leave people thinking we grabbed it. That's why there's been no killing so far. Once there is, the whole country'll be riled up, not just a few ranchers and the sheriff."

"I say you can't get rid of Cole any other way," Allie persisted. "Let me take care of him. One good shot and—"

"And after the way you've been talking, the sheriff'd have you in jail," Chad cut in. He flicked the boy's tight, angry face with icy eyes. "Cole stays alive . . . for the present. But when the time comes to get rid of Riddell and his outfit, Cole goes too."

He crushed out his cigaret and rose. "Remember, you're

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a part time deputy. Act like one. Just make sure Cole doesn't forget you're around. But don't roust him any more. He's hard and tough . . . and smart."

He strode away, leaving Allie staring after him. Allie was disappointed. This morning's talk hadn't gone as he expected it to. He'd hoped for orders that would let him start really riding Cole. But, he recalled sourly, in the beginning he agreed to do what Chad said. He didn't dare go on his own yet. There was too much Chad was keeping to himself. But when he learned the final plans, then he'd make his move. Then he'd show Chad Leeman who was the big man here.

Besides, Allie argued to himself, he wasn't sure just how far he could trust Chad. If Chad was planning to euchre Riddell and Smitty and Tige Parker out of their share, he could do the same to Allie Callahan.

Allie understood Chad's thinking well enough. Having Myra in control of two-thirds of the C/L galled him. And having lost his bid for her favor didn't make things any easier for Chad to swallow. His wanting to be the big boss was natural enough. Allie craved the same thing.

But mainly, Allie was concerned with Chad's plans for Cole. He couldn't help remembering that the two had continued riding together, even after their big fight. Chad might talk about getting rid of Cole, but what was he really planning to do?

Allie worked his way back to his paint and climbed into the saddle. "I'll just keep a better eye on Chad after this," he murmured to the horse. "Once I know what he's up to, what all he's got in mind, then I can figure my own moves." His voice turned savage. "And the first one will be putting Cole Pender where he can't get in the way—ever!"

As soon as Chad heard Allie ride away, he saddled his sorrel and headed it west. He drifted along like a man might if he happened to be looking for stray stock, and finally he worked his way into high country where tongues of timber reached into the sage. He was at the east edge of

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Tepee now and he stopped just short of the top of a marshy, steep-ended little draw that marked the boundary between the two spreads.

A squint at the sun told him the time was right, and he let the reins droop so the sorrel could nibble at the springy grass under its feet. Chad pushed his hat back off his forehead and slouched in the saddle. He could smell the pungency of the big ponderosas warming under the sun and a slow smile curved up his tight mouth.

The smell of those trees was the smell of money, he thought. Let Allie believe he was interested only in the land. By the time the fool kid found out the truth, it would be too late. But then whatever happened, it was going to be too late for Allie. Because when Cole died, he was going to be arrested for murder. The law would take care of him.

Chad breathed deeply of the pine-scented air. As soon as Cole was out of the way, it would be Sim's turn. Lifting his head, Chad looked west through an endless vista of trees. And this was only Tepee that he could see. Compared to the timber on Arrow, Tepee was as nothing.

He heard a horse coming and he straightened up, dropping his hand to the butt of his gun. The horse was almost to him before he could see it clearly through the screen of trees and brush that surrounded this tiny grassed clearing. When he recognized the big black belonging to Horneman, he let his hand drop from his gun butt to his side.

Horneman reined the black alongside Chad's sorrel. "Hunting strays again, I see," he said with a smile.

"And you're taking your regular morning ride, I see," Chad mocked.

Both men kept their voices low despite the isolation of this place. Now Horneman murmured, "I don't like what that young fool tried to do to Pender last night. It wasn't smart."

Horneman's quiet way of expressing his opinions irritated Chad. The man acted as if he was the boss of this operation. But for all of his competent appearance, every idea had been Chad's; and he remembered how long he had worked on getting Horneman to throw in with him in this venture. It

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had been a good year and a half since Horneman first told him the true value of the timber on Arrow and Tepee, and even now he wasn't too sure Horneman thought the risk was worth the potential profit.

Chad said testily, "Allie was acting under my orders." He gave Horneman a slantwise grin. "I should think anything that happens to Pender, you'd like. I told you how Myra never stopped talking about him since he left."

"If something's going to happen to Pender, let it happen," Horneman said sharply. "What good did last night's foolishness do?"

"I told you before that if Riddell and his boys don't get rid of Cole, I have a plan. They didn't chase him away, so now my plan starts working. It'll take a little time but it won't fail."

"We don't have the time to take," Horneman said irritably. "The railroad is starting to build right after next year's spring thaw. That means they'll be letting contracts this fall. Once they do, the news will be out."

Chad hadn't expected this. He said slowly, "How much time have we got?"

"A month at the most," Horneman said flatly.

Chad grunted in relief and reached for his tobacco sack. "In a month it'll be all over," he stated. "Cole, Sim, Carson, Allie, Riddell and his crew—they'll all be out of the way. There won't be anyone left to worry about having to share with."

"You can't have them all killed," Horneman said. "And just getting rid of Pender won't help. James will still have that herd."

"I don't intend to do any more killing than necessary," Chad said. "And don't worry about Carson keeping Tepee. There won't be any herd to back him up. Once Cole is gone, he'll sell quick enough."

"And Arrow," Horneman pressed. "Do you think getting rid of Pender will make Turley sell out too?"

"He'll sell," Chad said softly. "Riddell and his boys will have to cut and run soon. They've about used up their time

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here. When they do, everything will be made to look like Sim helped them get away. He won't be fool enough to stay around and risk jail. Not if someone offers him what looks like a fair price for his land."

He struck a match to his cigaret. "In a month, we'll have the deeds to Tepee and Arrow. In a year, you'll be able to buy that hotel out from under Myra and I'll own the C/L and we'll still have money enough to use it for cowfeed if we want."

"See that it happens," Horneman said heavily. "The longer it takes the more it costs. And I haven't got any more money to spare."

"I told you," Chad shot back. "Everything is all set. Don't start complaining now."

"I've followed your plans," Horneman said. "I brought in Riddell and his crew and paid them their gunhand wages. Even when I thought it was a waste of time, I had that note prepared and delivered to the Reno bank. I took a risk contacting Riddell and getting him to steal that Winchester and leave it at the ambush. I told you those things wouldn't work, and they haven't."

"It's time to do something that does work. You've got a week. If Pender isn't out of the way by then, I'll take over."

He swung the black and rode swiftly away. Chad stared angrily after him. By God, he'd show Horneman who was bossing this operation. Then he shook his head sourly. The ideas were his, all right. But the money behind everything was Horneman's. And more money was still needed, to buy up Tepee and Arrow. And the contacts with the railroad, those were Horneman's too.

Chad drifted the sorrel slowly back toward the home ranch. He was a careful man, liking to act slowly, to make sure of every move before starting it. But now he knew he had to hurry, and the pressure of this bothered him.

He stared in the direction Horneman had gone. "All right," he whispered aloud, "it'll be done in a week." He gave the reins a savage twist and kicked the sorrel's flanks with his sharp spurs.

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"You can stop worrying about Pender," he flung out as if Horneman could still hear him. "But I'm getting rid of him my way."

### VII

It took the better part of the day to drive the herd over the low pass, down across the valley floor, and into the hills. A few people came to stare, and Shorty French and his crew dropped their haying long enough to examine the stock thoroughly, but no one made any attempt to turn Cole back.

The night had been quiet too, Julio reported. And Cole wondered if the raiders were waiting for his guard to drop before they struck or if they were hiding now in the cool quiet of the hills near the meadow. But by late afternoon the cattle were on their way down from the last ridge and still they had not been bothered.

"Don't let this peacefulness fool you, boy," Carson James warned. "We might not have any trouble for quite a spell, but when they hit it'll be quick and hard."

He cut his horse away to haze a drifting cow back onto the trail. He returned swearing at a branch that had reached out to slap him in the face. "If pine trees was grass, I'd a been a rich man by now," he snorted.

"You and Sim both," Cole called back. He saw with relief that the timber was ending just below. Except for a few narrow tongues reaching downslope to the edge of the big meadow, the way was clear. And now the meadow spread out below, a flowing carpet of rich grass trimmed on one edge by silver threading that marked the beginning of the east fork of the Gunsight River.

The cattle grew eager as they smelled grass and water, and the men had to fight to keep them from breaking into a run over the rough ground. Finally they reached the meadow and flowed over it in a brown and white wave.

Julio came alongside Cole, a wide grin splitting his seamed

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face. "Ay, a beautiful sight," he said. "And see how much they like their new home!"

"Let's hope they stay around long enough to enjoy it," Cole answered. He was relieved to have the cattle in the meadow but still troubled that no one had interfered with them.

He stared out over the meadow now, remembering how often these past years it had been in his mind. He no longer saw it just in terms of fine grazing land but in terms of defense. It was an easy enough place to keep the stock in with each end naturally fenced by steep cliffs of black volcanic rock. The cliff on the east end glistened in the last of the sunshine as innumerable tiny springs oozed out of the steep face and gathered at the bottom to begin the fork of the Gunsight River. In contrast, the west cliff was dry, with a bottle-necked draw splitting it almost dead center. Cole remembered the draw as running due west through the hills almost to the edge of Arrow, and he remembered it as being brush choked, waterless, and hot under a summer sun. He didn't think it would tempt the cattle but decided to throw a fence across the narrow mouth just the same.

He looked across at the north slope. It was steeper than the one they had just come down, and there was more lava rock rising to a sharp ridge. Even so, a lot of grass grew between the rocks, and he said, "We'll fence both sides and the draw at the west end. Then a night and morning check should be enough to keep an eye on them."

"Unless someone cuts the fence," Carson James said sourly.

"If they do, there isn't much place for the cows to wander," Cole said. "We've got winter to get ready for. We can't spend all our time sitting up here."

He reached for his carbine as the sounds of a horse coming down the south slope behind them rang clearly in the thin, sharp air. His hand dropped away as Raul Horne-man rode into view.

He handled the big black easily and well over the difficult ground and reined to a stop beside Cole. His eyes were on the cattle. "That's as fine a bunch of fancy stuff as I ever saw in these parts," he acknowledged.

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Carson James swelled up as if bringing the blooded stock here had been his idea. "This'll be the best thing that ever happened to valley beef," he proclaimed. "They'll all be yelling for studs come next year."

"Is that how you plan to make your money?" Horneman asked with frank curiosity.

"Some," Cole agreed. "And I'll sell a little breeding stock. But for the most part, we'll let the drop go to the market as prime beef, ship to fattening pens and on to the coast to the fancy restaurants."

"That's good money," Horneman agreed. "But it isn't quick."

"I didn't figure on quick money," Cole said. He added, not looking at Carson James. "I counted on the regular Tepee herd to carry us the first year or two. But with a good spring drop we'll make out anyway."

Horneman leaned forward in the saddle, his expert's gaze still on the cattle. "When you're ready to do some selling, let me know. I know quite a few buyers."

"My thanks," Cole said.

Horneman put a hand on the butt of the carbine sticking from his saddle boot. "And if you need any other kind of help, call on me," he said. "I haven't shot anything with this but a coyote, but I know how to use it."

He wheeled his black and cantered back up the slope and out of sight. Carson James spat. "You want his help, boy?"

"When I need help, I'll take all that's offered me," Cole said. He studied the lengthening shadows made by the disappearing sun.

"Settle the boys in, will you," he said to James. "I've got one more piece of business before supper."

Not waiting for an answer, he rode westward, along the edge of the meadow. The south slope was steeper here, rising quickly to a sharp ridge and so forming a natural barrier. At the end of the meadow the ridge pushed northward, forcing Cole to ride a narrow trail that ran along the lip of the bottle-necked draw. At the far end of the draw the trail disappeared, leaving Cole faced with a short, steep

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slide into a canyon. He let the roan pick its way to the bottom and paused.

He sat, sorting out his memories. This was all scabland, broken country with twisting canyons and sharp, barren ridges. Left, he recalled, would work him onto a trail that followed the north rim of the bottle-necked draw. He reined to the right, thinking that this was the way to the Arrow home ranch.

Twice he came to branches leading into other canyons, but he held to the right and finally came in sight of Sim Turley's big stone house. He dropped the roan down a corridor lined with tall ponderosas and came into the open between the barn and the corral.

A gun boomed out of the dusk and lead whistled close over his head. After Sim's invitation of last night, Cole hadn't expected trouble and the shot caught him unprepared. Now he flattened himself in the saddle.

"Cole Pender here!" he called.

Two more shots sent dirt spurting close to the horse's hoofs. Cole swore and reined to his left, sending the roan around a corner of the big barn. He pulled his carbine free.

Riddell and his two men swept into view, their hand guns drawn. They stopped abruptly as Cole lifted the barrel of the carbine.

"When you come onto Arrow these days, come easy," Riddell growled.

"He must be looking for the boss again," Smitty said in the shrill voice. "I can tell. He's got a gun handy."

Tige Parker moved his horse so that Cole was boxed by the three Arrow men. Cole sat quietly, saying nothing. In the distance a door slammed and two men could be heard running across the yard. A voice bellowed, "Riddell? What the devil's going on out there?"

It was Sim Turley's voice. Cole looked at Riddell, a thin smile on his lips. "Go on, start shooting," Cole invited. "If Sim's the man behind you three so-called raiders, you'll get a bonus . . . If you live long enough to collect it." The carbine muzzle jerked slightly.

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Riddell cursed him in an ugly voice and then jerked his head at Tige Parker. "Move your horse. Let him ride out so the boss and the sheriff can have a look."

Tige Parker backed his horse aside. Cole remained where he was. Sim Turley shouted from the near distance, "Riddell? Where are you three?"

"We'll be along, boss," Riddell said in a sarcastically subservient voice. He motioned to Cole. "Get riding."

"After you, gents," Cole said dryly. "I learned a long time ago who not to show my back to."

Riddell cursed him again. Before he could move his horse, Sim Turley swung around the corner of the barn, his gun in his hand. Cole recognized the spare, stooped figure of Sheriff Mullan a short distance behind.

"Pender came riding in here with his carbine in his lap," Riddell said sullenly.

"I drew it after they started using me for a target," Cole replied quietly. "Hello Sim, Sheriff."

Sim turned on Riddell. "You heard me tell Cole to come here. Now get away, all three of you."

Silently, Riddell holstered his gun and led his men toward the corral. Cole pushed the carbine back into its boot and dropped to the ground. He took the hard hand Sim thrust at him. The sheriff made no offer to shake hands, he noticed. As he saw the man close up, he understood what people had meant. Mullan had aged greatly in ten years. Weariness was etched deeply on his knobbly features.

"Fine welcomes you been getting," Sim said wryly.

"I've had worse," Cole replied. They started toward the house, Cole leading the roan.

Mullan said suddenly, "Chad tells me you met him on the road yesterday with a gun ready."

"I'd just been ambushed," Cole answered. "What would you have done?"

"And you rode across Arrow last night with a rifle in your lap," Mullan went on accusingly.

Cole realized that further explanation would be futile in the face of this antagonism. The sheriff was not hostile to him

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personally, he thought, but to the idea, the threat, he represented. He was blinded by his own fears. The fears of a tired, set old man faced with something new. Even so, Cole found Mullan's attitude hard to accept calmly.

He made a strong effort to keep his voice level. "Sheriff, I've heard how you feel about my coming here. And I'll tell you now how it's going to be with me.

"Every cent I have and my future are tied up in the Gunsight country. I'll not stand by and watch them taken away from me. Where I've been, a man has the right to defend what is his. I won't go out of my way to fight, but if anybody hits me or mine, I'll hit back."

"Taking the law into your own hands is no better than being a common criminal," Mullan snapped. "What do you think would happen if Carson decided Sim was back of the trouble and came gunning for him? Or if Sim braced Chad Leeman and the C/L? There'd be a range war before I could stop it."

"I won't start shooting at my neighbors because I've heard some gossip," Cole rejoined. "Nor will I shoot a man for coming onto Tepee. But if I catch the raiders there, I won't come crying to you before I defend what's mine."

"If you shoot anyone on Tepee, you'd better have sound proof against them," Mullan cried at him. "So far I've kept this trouble from breaking into feuds. I'll not have my valley torn apart because of you taking the law into your own hands. If you have trouble, come to me. Don't think you can make yourself judge and jury and executioner!"

He swung around and strode away. His horse was at the rail by the back veranda. He mounted slowly, almost awkwardly, and rode around the house and into the quickening darkness.

Sim Turley had been standing quietly to one side. He said now, "You can see how folks feel, Cole. After hearing that kind of talk these past months, I got to thinking the same thing—you'd start raising hell the minute you hit the valley."

"I had a little raised for me," Cole replied dryly. He shook

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his head. "I can understand how the sheriff feels. He's afraid the power of the law will be weakened if men take on their own problems. I've seen that happen before. But I can't recall you or Carson or Chad ever being afraid to defend what you thought was rightfully yours."

"It ain't a matter of being afraid," Sim replied slowly. "It's more like being buffaloeed. They sneak up and hit and disappear. And they seem to know when's best to hit and where it will hurt the most. It's like fighting a bunch of smart ghosts."

Deliberately Cole looked toward the corral where Riddell and his men were turning in some horses. "I'd say they were pretty solid ghosts," he remarked.

Sim seemed about to speak and stopped himself. "Let's go inside," he said finally.

Putting the roan at the hitch rail, Cole untied the Winchester from behind the saddle and followed Sim Turley into the house. Once more it seemed to Cole that the past ten years had never happened; the cluttered veranda, the kitchen with its rich patina of odors, the glimpse of the dining room and parlor, all were the same.

Sim took the granite-ware coffee pot off the back of the stove and poured two cups full. Setting them on the table, he motioned for Cole to sit down.

Cole handed him the Winchester. "When I was ambushed yesterday this was left behind—on purpose, I'd say."

Sim took the gun, holding it as if it might have come fresh from a fire. "This is mine!" he whispered.

He laid the gun on the table and dropped heavily into a chair. "This makes the stories against me even better," he said in a tired voice. "You've heard them?"

"I've heard," Cole agreed.

"And that's why you figure my crew to be the raiders?"

Cole shook his head. "The leader of the ambushers was half again as wide and not close to being as tall as you," he said. "He was trying to hide his size under loose clothing, but I'd judge him about Riddell's build."

Sim rubbed a hand over his face. "Yesterday afternoon I'd

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swear I had a good eye on those three. I sent them to hunt strays and watched them ride west. I even went a piece myself."

Cole stared off into space. "As I recall this country, a man could go west into the timber, cut over the ridge, and be in a good position to swing south and ride straight across the flats to the stage road."

"That's what they must have done," Sim admitted grudgingly. He swore. "That means it was all planned ahead of time. They had a pretty good idea when you'd have the herd near the valley and that you'd be using the road for your drive. Now how the devil could they have managed that?"

"The stage from Reno passed us yesterday morning," Cole said. "Anyone on it could have mentioned they passed us. Or if someone was waiting to hear, they could have questioned the driver when he got to Gunsight."

"Horneman came in on that stage," Sim said. "He could have mentioned it in the hotel or at Healy's." He shrugged. "What difference does it make. I'm as sure as you are, maybe more so, that it was my crew ambushed you. I even figure Riddell stole this gun of mine and left it for you to pick up. But what proof have I got?" He sipped his coffee and added bitterly, "And if I do get proof, folks will say it makes them stories about me even more likely. They are my crew."

Cole could see how the weight of this had aged Sim Turley, putting a stoop into his once straight body, drawing new lines around his eyes. He said, "When it first started, why didn't you call on me, Sim?"

"When it first started, it didn't seem like much," Sim said quickly. "Then later I got to thinking like Myra—that you'd come charging in here and get yourself killed. And finally, the sheriff and a lot of other wagging jaws convinced me we'd all be better off if you stayed away until the trouble was over. What with your rep and all." he added lamely.

"Over!" Cole cried. "Do you people here think this sort of thing is like a rainstorm—it wets you down for a time and

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then blows away? I've seen range hogs work before. They don't stop until they're driven off or get what they want."

"That's just it," Sim retorted. "There ain't any range hogs. Arrow and Tepee aren't worth fighting for until cows start eating pine bark. The only man who'd profit would be me, taking over the C/L."

"There's a reason for all this," Cole said stubbornly. "A lot of money has been spent and time and trouble taken by somebody—bringing in the raiders, and giving them orders as to where and when to hit."

"Who?" Sim demanded. "The sheriff has checked out every man in the valley. It ain't any of the small ranchers over on the south side. It ain't any of us on this side. No man's fool enough to hurt himself as bad as Arrow and Tepee and the C/L have been hurt just so he could grab a little more grass. Who does that leave?"

"It isn't Riddell," Cole replied. "He isn't a big enough man to carry through a long range plan." He took out his tobacco sack. "Riddell and his outfit are working for someone who knows this valley and the people in it, and knows them well."

"Me," Sim grunted. "Even Mullan has got to thinking I'm the one. He ain't come out direct and said so, but tonight he was here wanting to know why I didn't fire those three. I tried to explain that as long as they're around, I can keep an eye on them some of the time. If I ran them off, they'd go into the hills. And whoever's behind them would keep giving orders, sending them down to hit and run like they do now. Only without me watching, they could do it more often."

"If they headed into the hills, a posse would flush them out fast enough," Cole argued.

"Would you send a posse after a man with no proof against him?"

"No," Cole agreed. He shaped his cigaret and lit it and then, reluctantly, took the warning note from his pocket and handed it to Sim Turley. "This was waiting for me when I got to the Reno bank," he said. "Some old timer from the

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stage station delivered it. I found him, all right, but I couldn't make him tell me anything."

Sim looked at the note and gave a snort of disgust. He pushed it back to Cole. He said slowly, "I guess I better admit I heard you hollering at me at the stage station. I didn't hanker to talk to you right then. With Horneman standing by, I didn't want it to look like we had a secret meeting set up in Reno."

"Then you've heard Chad's claim that I came here to help you against the C/L?"

"It ain't Chad's story," Sim said. "Allie Callahan started it. He don't like me much better'n' he does you. He thinks I talked Myra into holding back his share of the ranch until he gets big enough to fill his britches. And so I did."

He pointed at the note. "I don't know nothing about that, Cole. I went to Reno to do some bank business. Besides, I got more sense than to try to scare you away with something like that."

"Did anybody know ahead of time you were going to Reno?" Cole asked.

"Most everybody. It was no secret."

Cole nodded. "If I had believed those stories about you before, I wouldn't be believing them now," he said. "You aren't a fool, and only a fool would make himself so obviously guilty. As I see it, that note wasn't expected to really work, scare me off; it was supposed to lead me to you, since you were in Reno at the time it was delivered. The same thing is true of your gun. It was left on the trail to lead me to you."

He lifted his coffee cup. "Did it ever seem strange to you, Sim, that those three hardcases just happened to be drifting through Gunsight when you had to have a crew?"

"I thought about it," Sim admitted. "I thought about them three a lot lately. And once I catch them at anything wrong—then I act. Until then, what can I do?"

"Just what you've been doing," Cole said. "I have the feeling they won't wait too long to hit at me. That herd of mine makes Tepee too strong again."

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He rubbed out his cigaret. "And when they come, I'll be ready."

"We've all said that," Sim answered. "But it don't work out that way. When they hit, it ain't when you're expecting, and it ain't where you're watching."

### VIII

THE RAIDERS struck on the eighth day. Julio had taken it on himself to make a daily noontime inspection of the meadow, and this day he came galloping into the yard, shouting for Nito.

Cole came out of the barn with Nito at his heels. "The fence is cut," Julio cried. "Two of our *becerros* and one *toro* are gone!"

Nito started immediately for his horse. Cole followed. "We'll all go," he said. He sent the Tejanos ahead and rounded up Carson James.

Nito and Julio were not in sight when Cole and James reached the meadow. It lay quiet under the September sun; the cattle grazed placidly near the water at the east end. Carbines across their laps, Cole and James rode slowly along the fence westward. They were halfway to the west cliff before they found the downed fence wire.

Cole looked at the south slope directly opposite the cut fence. It was steep here, rising quickly to a sharp ridge. "Why cut it here?" he demanded. "The stock is at the other end. If they did drift out this way, there's nothing to tempt them to go very far."

Before James could comment, three head of cattle came running awkwardly out of the bottle-necked draw with Julio and Nito close behind. Julio swung to where Cole waited. Nito pushed the cattle on toward the others.

"The fence across the draw is cut too," Julio called out. "These three were in the brush there." He looked disgusted. "Very clear tracks were left by one horseman." His disgust

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turned to obvious puzzlement. "Why was such a stupid thing done, Señor Cole?"

"Half of what the raiders do makes no sense," James said after Cole translated Julio's Spanish for him. "Sometimes they seem to cause trouble the way kids do, for the fun of it."

Cole felt a sense of uneasiness. "I don't think so," he said. "Whatever they do, there's a reason behind it."

He was thinking that for a week they had gone about their work without interference—stringing fence, cleaning out water holes, leaving the stock for a full day while they worked in the hayfields. At the same time, Julio made it a point to ride here each noon, as well as in the morning and at night. Anyone who took the trouble to watch would know this pattern.

Cole said, "How fresh were the tracks?"

"They were made within the hour," Julio replied promptly.

The feeling of uneasiness grew stronger in Cole. "If the fence cutter wanted to get the cattle out of the meadow, he'd have done it after Julio made his noon trip, not before," he said to Carson James. "Doing it just before dinnertime means it would be found out right away."

"That's what I say, it makes no sense!" James said shrilly.

He lifted himself in the saddle and turned, one arm lifted as he pointed toward the bottle-necked draw. "Who'd drive them there?"

The gunshot sounded clear and sharp on the mountain air. His shrill voice broke off abruptly. Surprise touched his seamed face and he jolted forward, pitching out of the saddle with his arm still lifted, his hand still pointing.

Cole leaped clear of the saddle, holding his carbine. He spun around as he landed, his eyes sweeping the sharp ridge at the top of the south slope. Faint smoke drifted up from a shallow notch in the rimrock. Cole hunkered down and fired, sending a bullet screaming through the notch.

No answering shot came. Cole held his fire, his carbine ready to answer the first flicker of movement. But there was none. Instead, he heard the echo of hoofs hammering hard down a canyon floor.

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Cole straightened up and hurried to the motionless form of Carson James. Julio was kneeling beside him. "The bullet is in the shoulder," he said excitedly. "He is yet alive."

Cole saw the old man stir and make an effort to sit up. He thought, This was no sniping like it had been before. If James hadn't turned to point, the bullet would have caught him square in the back.

He noted the strength on James' features and knew he would be all right, for the time being at least. Cole said quickly, "You two get Carson to the house. Wait for me there and we'll take him to the doctor."

Swiftly, he climbed into the saddle and rode hard for the trail that followed the edge of the draw. They reached the slide down into the canyon and the roan took it on his haunches, front legs braced, rump spewing small rocks and dust. At the bottom, Cole reined to the right. He could hear hoofs beating up from the next canyon, and he rode hard to be first to reach the point where the two canyons met.

He angled left now rather than right as he had the time going to Arrow. The sounds made by the other rider grew fainter and then swelled again as the two trails came closer together. At the junction, Cole pulled up and waited, carbine still in hand. The rider was still to his left, coming toward him. He swept into view suddenly, exploding from around a sharply angled corner.

Cole cried, "Hold it there!"

He had a glimpse of Smitty, perched monkey-like on his saddle, frantically scouring his horse's flanks with his spurs. Then rider and horse spurred ahead. Cole sent the roan after them. He sent a shot screaming high over Smitty's head. "Rein up!"

Smitty pulled to a halt and sat with his hands held high.

"Drop your guns!" Cole ordered.

Smitty turned, staring blankly at him. "What do you want with me, Pender? This is Arrow land."

Cole looked around and realized that the little man was right. The canyons had swung in wide arcs, bearing to the

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west. "You weren't on Arrow when you shot a man," Cole snapped.

Smitty tried to register surprise. "I shot nobody! I been on Arrow all the time, hunting strays."

Since the canyon Smitty had come down led only to Tepee, Cole didn't bother to answer. He said, "Drop your guns and make it quick."

Smitty sat motionless. Cole levered a cartridge into the chamber of his carbine and rode forward a few paces. Hurriedly, Smitty's .44 and his rifle dropped to the hard bottom of the canyon. At Cole's order, he moved his horse forward a few paces. Cole dismounted and picked up the guns. He sniffed the barrel of the rifle. It had been recently fired.

"Shooting jackrabbits?"

Smitty swore at him. "The law'll hear about this!" he cried. "Get off Arrow land."

Cole carried the guns back to the roan and mounted. "Up ahead there's a draw that'll work us back to Tepee," he said. "Let's ride."

Smitty moved his horse forward reluctantly. Cole stayed a dozen paces behind, watching warily for a move to escape. The canyon narrowed, the walls growing steeper into this chopped up maze of wasteland.

When the shot came, it caught Cole by surprise. He heard the sharp sound of a carbine and saw Smitty go forward as if someone had clubbed him. His horse bucked and leaped away in fright, sending Smitty's small body out of the saddle to sprawl on the canyon floor.

Cole twisted around. A bullet whined level with his shoulder and struck the canyon wall. To the left and a good fifty yards back, he made out movement. He fired and dropped out of the saddle. He ran zigzag to the foot of the rocky slope on his left, levering in another shell. A second shot kicked dirt a few feet from his boots and then he was too close to the foot of the slope for the other to fire effectively. He started climbing.

He was halfway up the slope when he heard the killer ride away, the echo of hoofs beating on rocky ground rapidly

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growing fainter. Cole kept doggedly on, even though he knew he had no chance to even glimpse the man. By the time Cole reached the top of the slope, he would be long gone in the maze. But Cole had learned early in his law work that even the most careful criminal often left evidence behind.

He reached the ridge and walked along it, his eyes fixed on the point ahead where he had seen movement. He marked it by a small juniper and when he reached the spot, he saw a shallow saddle on the ridge, the right depth for a man to lie and steady a gun on its rim.

Squatting, Cole studied the ground. It was hard, sun-baked, and the killer's body had left no sign. Frowning, Cole looked about for ejected shells. There were none. Cautiously he moved down a steep slope into the canyon where the other had ridden away. Here the ground was rock hard and not even the horse had left evidence of having been there.

Carefully Cole studied the slope the man had come down to reach his horse. A few displaced rocks and a complete lack of bootprints showed that he had been clever enough to jump down from boulder to boulder, taking no chances of leaving any sign of his presence.

Even without the man's having left any prints, Cole knew he had ridden eastward. But pursuit now would be pointless. By the time he could get the roan into this canyon, the man would be long gone. He could track as well after he had seen to Carson James as he could now.

Hurrying back to the roan, he rode up the canyon until he found Smitty's horse. He brought it back and roped the small, still body belly-down over the saddle. Then he led the nervous, snorting animal through a twist of canyons to Tepee.

The Tejanos and Carson James had just arrived as Cole rode in. The old man was upright in the saddle, his legs lashed tightly to his horse. He looked drawn and pale but he had strength enough to stare at the burden the strange horse carried.

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"One of them varmints of Riddell's!" he grunted. "I ain't surprised. Looks like he fought you a mite," he added.

"I didn't kill him," Cole replied. "The man who did was careful to leave no sign." He told them briefly what had happened.

James looked unhappy. "That's going to mean trouble, boy. You know the sheriff. He'll claim you shot Smitty instead of bringing him in for the law to take care of."

Cole had considered this and rejected it. "Anybody can tell what happened by reading the sign in those canyons," he said. "Mullan may be stubborn but he's no fool."

He rode close to the old man, noting the pallor on his face and the glaze of shock hovering around his eyes. "We'll get a chance to find out how the sheriff feels," Cole said. "I'm taking you into the doctor pronto."

"I been stung worse by hornets," James retorted. "You go cut that killer's trail while it's still fresh. The boys here can slap on a bandage and that'll hold me until we get to town."

Cole turned to his men, instructing them to take care of the old man and then get up to the meadow and fix the fence. "And one of you'd better stand guard tonight," he added. "Whoever had this done won't be finished with Tepee, so watch yourselves."

Without waiting for an answer, he swung the roan across the yard and plunged into the canyon that led to the trail taken by the killer.

## IX

ALLIE CALLAHAN felt the first stir of satisfaction in the week he had been following Chad Leeman. He was hunkered down now in rocky country above the big timbered flat that lay well up into the hills belonging to Arrow.

He had tracked Chad along the upper ridges of the C/L, across the high land belonging to Tepee, and finally here. He could see Chad now, working his way carefully across the flat toward the Arrow crew. From the way Riddell and

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his men moved about, Allie guessed they were chousing strays. When Sim Turley appeared suddenly, driving two head of stock in front of him, Allie knew that he was right.

He watched as Chad met briefly with Rid 'ell and then started back the way he had come. Allie lingered a short time, long enough to see Riddell locate Smitty and speak to him. Then he crawled through the rocks back to his paint and took up Chad's trail again.

What followed puzzled Allie. He was on the high point of the north slope above Tepee's big meadow when he caught sight of Chad again. Chad was working his way into the maze. Twice he disappeared and reappeared. The third time, he was out of sight for so long that Allie thought he had lost him. Then Chad showed up again, climbing on foot to belly down on a ridge between two of the canyons in the maze. From Allie's position, Chad was a tiny but clear figure and the sight of him lying on the ridge under the hot sun made no sense at all to Allie.

Then Smitty appeared, pushing his horse hard onto Tepee's big meadow. Allie watched him cut the west side fence, ride into the meadow and cut the fence across the mouth of the draw, and then haze two calves and a bull up into the draw. His actions made no more sense to Allie than Chad's had, until Allie saw him take up a position on the south ridge directly opposite the cut fence.

When Julio appeared, rode away, and came back with Nito, Allie began to smile. Cole would be along soon, he guessed shrewdly and then Smitty would start his sharp-shooting sniping. The only thing he couldn't understand was Chad's quiet waiting on that ridge in the maze.

When Smitty's bullet knocked Carson James out of the saddle, Allie was startled. He had expected more sniping, most of it aimed at Cole, but this shooting was deliberate. Only Carson's moving in the saddle had kept him from being killed.

Now Allie cursed Smitty for a fool as he saw the little man scuttle for his horse and hammer it straight down a

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canyon that would take him to Arrow. As soon as Cole took up the chase, Allie knew that Smitty would be caught.

Moving to a point thirty yards or so to his left, he was able to look down into the canyons where Cole and Smitty rode. He saw Cole stop Smitty and force him to drop his guns, and then head him toward Tepee.

Now Allie thought he knew what Chad was waiting for—to stop Cole, to take Smitty away from him. He thought, Chad must know how sharp Cole is. He never bothered to protect his snipers before. And now Allie was torn. He saw light flicker off the barrel of Chad's rifle. Chad was going to shoot Cole! Allie was eager to see this. At the same time, he felt cheated. Cole was his to kill, not Chad's!

Chad's shot drifted very faintly to him. He swore in surprise as Smitty, not Cole, plunged out of the saddle. He sat rigidly, sweating for Chad as he saw the competent way Cole left the roan and brought his carbine into action, and the way Cole avoided Chad's shots and made his way up the slope. When Chad disappeared down the far side of the ridge, Allie started back for the paint. Then he stopped, watching Cole until he and the horse carrying Smitty finally disappeared from sight.

Then Allie went after Chad. He knew which way the canyon Chad was in led, and so he followed a roundabout trail that would bring him close on Chad's heels without too much chance of discovery. He could hear the sorrel moving quickly up ahead as he finally dropped to the floor of the canyon. There was a sharp rattle of rocks cascading and then the sounds of the horse were gone.

Allie rode around a final bend and stopped. Dust hung in the air, telling him that Chad had put the sorrel up a steep slope to get out of the canyon instead of riding out in the usual way through a small, tree-and brush-choked draw. Allie chose the draw, and it was only when he was half-way through that he understood Chad's choice of trails. Under the perpetual shade from the timber and the heavy brush, the draw bottom was constantly damp, its soil of a

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consistency to take the prints of a man or a horse and hold them.

Allie swore at his own carelessness. But it was too late to turn back now, and he rode on. He was nearly to the top of the draw when he heard a horse snort ahead. Leaning forward, he clamped a hand gently over the paint's muzzle. It stood quietly even after he removed his hand. Dropping to the ground, Allie slipped forward up the draw almost to its rim.

He swallowed a curse as a thick screen of brush cut off his view of the flat ground at the top of the draw. He could hear Chad talking to someone and hear the low answering murmur of a man's voice, but he couldn't see anything but brush.

He tried working his way closer, slipping sideways, staying behind the brush and thick-boled trees. He was stopped by a steep pitch and he stood where he was, clinging to a tree and straining his ears to hear what was being said.

Chad said, "I told you, Pender will be taken care of. But why risk doing it ourselves? He'll be in jail by tonight or tomorrow at the latest. By the time he gets out, if he ever does, there won't be anything left of Tepee for him to go home to."

The answer was too soft for Allie to catch. But the very fact that Chad was discussing plans with someone else gave Allie a glow of satisfaction. He had been right in thinking that Chad was not alone in running the trouble. For one thing, Chad lacked the money to pay Riddell and his crew their gunhand wages. For another, Riddell often acted on messages Chad could not possibly have given him, since Chad made it a point to be seen working or in town as often as possible.

In his eagerness, Allie almost pulled himself up the slope and through the screen of brush. But he held back in time. His knowing about the other man without Chad realizing it could be worth a lot to him sometime.

Now Chad and the other man were moving away. Chad's final words were barely audible. "I'm going to town. Pender will show up there pretty soon to show Smitty to the sheriff.

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You know what Mullan will try to do. See that you're around to give Cole a hand, but not too good a one."

The sounds of movement faded. Allie let go the tree trunk and started back to the waiting paint. He swore in disgust as he saw the clear tracks he had left in the moist dirt of the draw.

It wasn't too likely that anyone would trace him or Chad here, he thought. Except for a few sandy spots the canyon leading this way had a rock hard bottom. But he had watched Cole's sharp-eyed Tejanos track the missing beef across the meadow and into the draw as easily as if they'd been riding a marked trail. If they were good, Cole was most likely better.

To be on the safe side, Allie worked his way about the draw, stomping the shape out of the prints left by himself and the paint. A little easier now in his mind, he rode the horse up the slope Chad had taken. He stared in disappointment at the small clearing. The grass was too springy to show any useful prints. He started eastward but soon lost all sign where the trail of the two men blended into ground torn by the recent passing of a herd of beef.

He was about to go on to town when he thought again of Cole and his men trailing Chad up the canyon. Turning the paint, he worked back toward the draw, but angling upslope now to where he could belly down. He would give himself a half hour or so, he decided. If Cole or his men didn't show up by then, he could figure they weren't going to take up the trail.

From where he lay, he could see the sprawl of Tepee and a fair bit of the canyon Chad had ridden through. He had barely settled himself when he saw a rider coming, and soon he recognized Cole and his roan. He watched as Cole stopped and studied the ground, rode on, stopped again and went back to climb out of the canyon on foot.

Allie felt the dryness in his throat. Cole was backtracking along the trail he had taken to get into the canyon. In his concern over the sign in the draw, he had forgotten any tracks he might have left earlier. The way Cole studied the

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ground at the top of the ridge, and the direction he looked told Allie that Cole was building in his mind what had happened.

When Cole rode to the draw and disappeared, Allie chuckled. Whatever Cole might have found before, he wouldn't get much now. Not the way the prints in the draw had been messed up. But the minutes dragged on and Cole failed to return to the waiting roan. Allie felt the dryness again. What could Cole have found in the draw to keep him so long?

Finally Cole came back, mounted, and went up the slope onto the small clearing of springy grass. He rode a short distance east, turned the roan and rode fast in the direction of Tepee.

Allie got slowly to his feet. He was sure Cole had read enough sign to have guessed close to the truth. Allie thought of what Chad would say once Cole told his story. And he thought of what Cole's knowing would do to their plans.

He was halfway to town when he realized that what Cole said wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter at all. Not if he told a better story first. And as he rode, he worked out the perfect answer to his problem. It was an answer Chad would like; one Mullan would like.

Allie laughed. But it wasn't an answer Cole would like.

Cole found his first print in sand too soft to show any details. But that sign told him he was on the right track, and he moved eastward with more confidence.

He could see the rolling sage-dotted ridges of the C/L before he found the second print. And now he paused, staring down at signs left by two different horses. Even though they weren't sharp enough to be identifiable, the difference between the sets was obvious. One horse had carried a much heavier rider than the other; and it was a much bigger animal, with a longer stride.

He backtracked until he found the slope the second rider had used to reach the canyon. Leaving the roan, he climbed to the ridge at the top of the slope. Here he found the prints he sought, clear sets in crusty dirt. He read them

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carefully, noting that the horse was a small-hoofed one and judging the height of it by the length of its stride. He stood up and followed the direction the prints had come from. Where the ridge folded into another, he stopped. His eyes took in the contours of the land and he pictured the rider as he must have worked his way to this point.

Satisfaction flowed through Cole as it became clear that the man must have come down from high on the north ridge above the meadow. Holding this fact in his mind, he hurried back to the roan and rode on through the canyon.

He reached the small draw that marked the end of Tepee at this point. He saw where the rider of the bigger horse had sent his mount up the side of the canyon, while the rider of the smaller had ridden into the draw, dismounted, and begun to walk. Now he noticed that the prints left in the moist-bottomed draw had been trampled in an effort to blot them out and he moved slowly, looking for some sign that might have been overlooked.

He found it—two neat outlines of bootsoles half buried in brush through which the man had passed. The size of those bootprints brought a picture of Allie Callahan to Cole's mind. He studied them carefully, noting the way the left heel was worn away on the inside and the way both toes were scuffed down into the second layer of sole.

He moved on, seeing where the man had stood behind a screen of brush, where he had moved as if in an effort to find a better position, and where he had stood again, this time on a steep slope.

Returning to the roan, Cole followed the path of the larger horse out of the canyon and up onto the springy grass. Here was clear evidence that two horses had stood, for a short time at least. He moved on, reading the little sign he could find until it was lost in a maze of cattle prints.

He rode back to Tepee by a different route, building in his mind what must have happened. Allie—if it was Allie—had seen the sniping, the chase of Smitty, and the killing from high on the north ridge. Then he followed the killer, coming into the canyon not far from the soft-bottomed draw.

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He had gone into it and listened while the killer and another horseman met in the clearing with the springy grass. He had followed them until, even as Cole had, he lost their sign.

If this was true, then the only two people who could prove that Cole had not deliberately shot Smitty were the killer himself and Allie Callahan, who hated him!

### X

COLE returned to find Carson James lying on the parlor sofa, his cheeks flushed with fever, his eyes glazing over. He gave no response when Cole touched him.

Hurrying to the barn, Cole harnessed a team to the spring-wagon. He made a bed for James, cursing himself for not having done all this sooner. With the wagon ready, Cole lifted the old man and carried him outside. He woke from his stupor and grumbled as Cole laid him in the wagon bed.

"We're going for the doctor," Cole said. "It'll be a rough ride for a while, old timer."

"Just keep an eye out so the rest of that crew don't bush-wack you," James muttered. His eyes closed and he began to breathe raggedly.

Cole tied the horse carrying Smitty's body to the tailgate, climbed on the box, and started out of the yard. The twin ruts running down from Tepee to the valley kinked along the slope through heavy timber that cast deep shadows at this time of the afternoon. Cole rode warily, one hand on the reins, the other brushing the butt of his forty-four. It was a rugged ride and he was forced to go slow, but even so every jounce brought a groan from the old man behind him.

He was almost to the valley floor when he heard a horse being pushed hard up the trail. A small dun came around a bend and Cole recognized Myra riding it. She rode astride, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. She had no hat and her hair was floating loose. She brushed it back with an impatient gesture as she swung her horse alongside the wagon.

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Her eyes touched the motionless body and then moved questioningly to Cole. "Is he—?"

"No," Cole said. "The bullet went in and out. The Tejanos stopped the blood. It's mostly shock now. If the doctor can stop infection, he should be all right."

It struck him that she had showed no surprise at seeing Carson this way. "How did you know he'd been shot?"

Her voice came quick and urgent. "The story is all over town. About Smitty being shot too. Cole, you can't go into Sunsight. Allie's there, waiting to arrest you!"

"Arrest me?"

"For killing Smitty," she said. "He claimed he saw you shoot Smitty after Smitty shot Carson."

"I was right then!" Cole cried. "Allie was watching. He saw what happened—" He broke off. And Allie must have watched from somewhere as he tracked the killer, and guessed what he had found. And then had hurried to town to tell his version of the story first!

"Cole, what did happen?"

He told her quickly, his eyes on the rutted trail. He heard her sigh of resignation as he finished. "I thought it would be something like that," Myra said. "I didn't believe you'd shoot a man in the back deliberately."

"Is that what Allie claims?"

"Yes. Oh, he's clever, Cole. He told the sheriff almost the same story you told. Only he didn't mention anyone else. He said you shot Smitty out of the saddle and then rode to the pasture above the draw and talked to someone. He said he tried to get close enough to see and hear so as to find out who the other one was, but he couldn't."

She hesitated and added, "He claimed he was about to arrest you both when he thought it might be wiser to listen and stay alive, with two against him."

Cole swore to himself. Allie was clever, all right. Any sign he might have left was explained away by his story. "What else did he say?" he asked.

"This is the horrible part, Cole. Allie claims he heard you tell the other rider that it was time now to get rid of the

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remaining raiders . . . before they turned on you. Allie said he couldn't hear the second man's answer, but he was almost sure the voice was Sim's."

"Sim!" Cole exploded. "Why would I ride to the C/L to talk to Sim?"

"That's what I wondered," Myra admitted. "I spoke to Raul about that and he agreed it didn't make sense. He was going to come and warn you and Sim not to go to town, but I know shortcuts he doesn't and I came instead."

"What did Mullan think of the story?"

"He believed Allie," she said bitterly. "I know Allie well enough to be sure he wasn't telling the whole truth. You'd think the sheriff would know too by now; Allie lied to him enough over the years. But he just kept nodding his head and muttering, 'That's what I figured.'"

"The stubborn old fool," Cole said. They were on the wagonroad now and he swung the team toward town.

"You ride to warn Sim," Myra said, with pleading in her voice. "Let me take Carson to the doctor."

Cole shook his head. "I can't give my side of things if I'm hiding," he said flatly. "And you've risked the sheriff's anger already by coming here. I won't have you involved further."

He slapped the reins across the backs of the team. "Move along, there!"

He turned to Myra. "You said Allie's in town waiting for me. Where is the sheriff?"

"Chad rode into town just in time to hear Allie's story," she said. "He offered to go with the sheriff to look at the canyons, to check Allie's story is the way Chad put it."

"And help arrest me and Sim?" Cole asked dryly.

"I know that was in the sheriff's mind," she admitted. "He was terribly angry with Sim. He seemed to think that Smitty's being the one to shoot at Carson proves the Arrow crew are the raiders and that Sim is behind them."

"Mullan was sure they were the raiders before," Cole snorted. "But that didn't mean he suspected Sim too. If he'd

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make up his own mind instead of listening to Chad's crazy ideas, something might have been done before now."

He lifted the team's speed again. "You'd better see Sim," he counselled. "If Mullan tries to arrest him with no warning, he's apt to draw his gun and start shooting."

"Don't fight Allie, please," Myra burst out. "Raul said that if you are put in jail, he knows legal ways to get you out."

She swung her dun and put heels to it. Cole watched her out of sight and then concentrated on driving the team as fast as he dared. Now and then he hit a rough spot and winced as the old man behind him moaned with the pain of the jolt.

Cole emptied his mind of everything but the job of guiding the wagon, and it was almost a shock when he reached town and saw Allie Callahan standing just off the sidewalk, a star on his vest and one hand over the butt of the .44 hanging at his hip.

"Pull up, Cole!" he shouted. "You're under arrest. Pull up!"

Cole had the team at a fast walk now. He made no effort to slow down as they came abreast of the jailhouse. "I'm taking Carson to the doctor," he said. "You can find me there."

Allie started into the street. "I said pull up!" he bawled.

The horses were abreast of him now. A few people stood on the street, watching. Raul Horneman was outside the hotel; three townsmen and two cowhands had paused in Healy's doorway; a woman shopper was hurriedly tugging a small boy around a corner.

Allie reached for the headstall of the nearest horse. "This is the law talking," he said officiously. "Now rein in."

"You and I have one score to settle now," Cole said icily. "If you want to make it two, little man, just try to keep me from taking Carson to the doctor."

"I'll do that after you're locked up," Allie said.

His hand closed over the harness on the nearest horse. Cole jerked the reins, sending the team swerving, forcing Allie to jump back to keep from getting knocked down. He staggered, caught his balance, and pawed for his gun.

Cole was level with him now. Allie brought his .44 up,

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held it for a long instant and then let the muzzle drop. Cole's own gun was trained on him, holding steadily. And the expression on Cole's face was plain enough for any man to read.

"You're under arrest!" Allie bawled through his humiliation.

The team reached the corner and Cole began the swing around to the side of the hotel. Allie broke into a stumbling run after the wagon, still waving his gun. Cole caught a glimpse of Horneman stepping into the street and stopping Allie. Horneman spoke, his expression angry. Allie jerked away from the hand reaching for his shoulder. Horneman took a step forward and spoke again. Allie pushed his gun into his holster and strode sullenly on after the moving wagon.

He was only a few paces behind as Cole drew up in front of the doctor's small house. Ignoring Allie, Cole carried the old man into the house. Allie followed, but he said nothing.

The doctor took charge quickly. "That's a good job of bandaging," he commented. He indicated where Cole should lay Carson down. "He doesn't look too bad considering his age. Drop by later and I can tell you better how he'll be."

Cole offered his thanks and went out. Allie stopped him on the sidewalk. "Now what excuse have you got?"

Cole climbed to the wagon box and lifted the reins. "Get aboard," he said.

Allie pulled himself up and unholstered his gun. "I'll take charge now. Get along to the jailhouse."

Cole gave him a contemptuous look. "Where did you think I was taking Smitty, back home?"

Allie tried to tighten his voice and managed only to make it quiver with suppressed rage. "I'm charging you with resisting an officer!"

"I might have been if there'd been a legal attempt to arrest me," Cole said. "There wasn't."

He let Allie chew on that while he swung the wagon into the alley and drove the team up to the stable behind the hotel. Allie started to speak and stopped as the stableboy appeared. Cole climbed down. "Give them a good rubdown

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and a feed," he said. "They've been driven hard. Then harness them up again. I might be going back tonight."

He untied Smitty's horse from the tailgate and led it up the alley to the vacant lot and through that to the front of the jail.

On the way, Allie said, "The hell you're going back to-night!"

Cole tied the horse with the dead body roped belly down across the saddle to the hitchrail before the jailhouse. He said, "You made your story a little too good, Allie. There's a witness to what really happened. The sheriff is going to play hell with you when he finds out you lied . . . and why."

"I didn't see any witness!" Allie said fiercely. A crowd had begun to drift toward them. He prodded his gun into Cole's ribs. "Move inside."

Cole went into the office and dropped into a chair close to the desk. He reached for his tobacco with a leisurely motion. Allie's frustration at his attitude was plain to see. He wondered how far he dared goad the boy, how much it would take for him to throw away caution.

Allie sat in the desk chair and held the gun on Cole. "You'd do better with a pencil," Cole remarked. "I have a statement to make."

Allie suddenly seemed to realize that he had forgotten something. Heaving himself to his feet, he threw open a cell door. "In there. You can make your statement to the sheriff."

"You're the man on duty," Cole said quietly. "It's your job to take down what I have to say." He licked his cigaret into shape and hung it from a corner of his mouth. "I was a lawman before you got out of short pants, remember that. If you want me in that cell legally, bring a formal charge and take my statement."

Allie didn't want to believe him, but his hesitancy said he was afraid not to. He looked toward the door where a small group, headed by Horneman, stood watching.

Cole stood up and struck a match for his cigaret. He blew out the match and started for the door. "You'd better be sure of everything before you arrest me, Allie. Because

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the minute you do, someone is going to Reno for a lawyer and there'll be a suit against you and Mullan for improper arrest and detainment."

"I'm jailing you on suspicion of murder!" Allie cried, but he remained by the cell door, his gun hanging from his hand.

"Remember what I told you before," Horneman said from the doorway.

Allie scowled but said nothing. "If anyone wants me, I'll be at Healy's," Cole said pleasantly. He brushed past the small crowd and started across the street.

Horneman remained for a moment and then followed, catching him near the far sidewalk. "You took a risk there. Allie'd like nothing better than to kill you, I hear."

"He wants to do it without too many witnesses," Cole remarked. "Thanks for your help." With a nod, he went on into Healy's. Horneman turned to look up the darkening street. He frowned and then went back to the hotel and inside.

The small crowd wandered away from the jail. Allie stood by the open cell door, staring at nothing and cursing in a low, vicious voice.

## XI

ALLIE WAS slumped in the desk chair staring empty at the cell where he had tried to put Cole when he heard a rapid tattoo on the alley door. Rising quickly, he hurried down the corridor. "Yeh?"

"I'll meet you down below, and pronto." It was Chad's voice, sharp with irritation.

Allie started to protest that he couldn't leave while Mullan was gone, but the sound of heavy footsteps told him Chad had already walked away. Allie grinned a little, remembering the irritation in Chad's tone. The story Allie had told obviously had reached him, and that meant he knew just how much Allie had seen.

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The grin faded. Chad wouldn't have risked contacting him this way if he hadn't something important to say. The devil with the sheriff, Allie decided. He could always find an excuse for being away if he had to have one.

He slipped into the alley and started down it, walking as though he might be checking the dark shadows. He passed the rear of the blacksmith's shop, the last building at the lower end of the main street, and stepped into darkness under a sprawling cottonwood.

A rider came swinging out of the darkness. It was Chad on his sorrel. He and the horse both wore their California finery.

"Celebrating something?" Allie asked softly.

Chad scowled through dimness at him. "You're a fool for telling a story like that to Mullan," he said.

"You said you wanted Cole in jail," Allie replied. "I helped put him there."

"The last I saw of him, he was in Healy's," Chad said heavily.

"The sheriff will take care of him," Allie said. "Cole threw a lot of law at me and Horneman pitched in to help him. I didn't want to risk a lawyer getting Cole out, so I let him go. But Mullan will know what to do."

"If he ever gets back," Chad said sourly. "I was with him this afternoon. He rode those canyons and that draw like he was trying to memorize all the signs you left there."

"He can read the sign I left to fit my story," Allie said. "It's the sign you might have laid down that worries me."

He saw Chad stiffen and knew he had scored a point. He added unnecessarily, "I saw the whole thing, almost the way I told it. I only left out—"

"That's enough of that," Chad said savagely. "But just remember, if Cole breaks your story, you'll be as guilty as I am. You knew what happened and didn't tell the sheriff. That means something in law."

"He won't break my story," Allie said. "He claimed there was another witness, but he's lying. I didn't see nobody."

He was tired of talking about this. Nothing could be

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gained by chewing it over as far as Allie could see. He said, "Did you haul me down here to cuss me out?"

"Don't get snotty!" Chad snapped. "I'm still the boss and don't forget it." He shifted in the saddle. "I got you here to tell you that as soon as Cole's tight in jail, we start moving on Tepee. If he goes in tonight, I want you to fix it with Mullan so you can be guarding the meadow tomorrow from dark on. Just you. If Cole keeps out of jail until tomorrow, then we move the next day."

"And what if he don't go in at all?"

"He will," Chad said confidently. "I talked enough with Mullan to be pretty sure of that. Can you do your job?"

"I can be up at the meadow," Allie agreed slowly. "I already put the idea in the sheriff's head today. I told him what with Cole in trouble and Carson shot, it was going to be rough on those two Tejanos to have to do all the ranch work and keep an eye out for the raiders too."

"Good," Chad grunted.

"So I go to the meadow and stand guard? Then what?"

"You'll be told when the time comes," Chad snapped.

Chad's tone of finality told Allie he would have to be content with that much for now. But one point bothered him. He said, "What about Riddell and Tige Parker? What if Mullan catches them?"

"Hell, they're high in the hills by now. Riddell knew what was coming."

"He knew about Smitty—that he'd be killed?"

"What was Smitty to Riddell? The way he and Tige figure, it's one less to split their share of the loot with."

He chuckled. "Mullan's got the wind up about Sim now too. I helped him along thinking Sim might have a hand in everything. Your telling the sheriff you thought Cole had a meeting with Sim was a good idea."

"Thanks," Allie said sourly. He was about to say more when someone let out a wild shout from a saloon a half block up the street. The sorrel jumped. Chad drew it back down with a curse and a vicious twist of the reins. The sharpness of the spade bit made the horse whinny.

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Allie stepped forward, reaching for Chad's leg. "There's no call for that!" he cried. "What do you want to go treating an animal that way for?" He caught Chad's ankle and jerked in an effort to haul him out of the saddle.

Chad swung the sorrel, forcing Allie back. He pulled it to a stop and stared coldly down, his .44 steady in his hand.

"Keep your hands to yourself," Chad said softly. "I handle my horses the way I see fit, not the way you want."

Allie's fists clenched. "Someday one's going to trample you to death. I just hope I'm around to watch."

"Get about your business," Chad said. He holstered his gun and started slowly away.

Shaking, Allie began his return up the alley. He was well behind the blacksmith's shop when he heard a sharp whistle from below and across the street. Curiously, he trotted back to the corner of the building and peered into the darkness. He saw Chad put the sorrel into a run across the street and into spottily treed land sloping down to the creek. From behind the warehouse that was opposite the blacksmith shop another horse and rider appeared. But they stayed too much in shadow for Allie to tell much except that both looked big.

For a moment Allie was tempted to try to sneak up and see just who it was Chad had his meetings with. He grinned at the thought that it would be funny if Sim was the man. He took a few steps toward the street and stopped. The country was too open, with too few big trees for him to risk getting caught. He had a shrewd idea of what Chad would do if he caught Allie spying. If Chad had wanted him to know who the other man was, he'd have told by now.

Reluctantly, Allie retraced his steps to the jail and settled down to wait for Mullan to come so they could arrest Cole.

Shortly after Horneman saw Allie walk away from the big cottonwood, he whistled his signal to Chad. When he saw the sorrel move across the street, he sent his black out from behind the warehouse and started through the scanty cover of the scattered trees toward the creek. They met by a stand

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of willows, where the gurgle of the water would cover their voices to anyone trying to listen.

"Where have you been?" Horneman demanded almost roughly. "Myra rode off this afternoon to warn Cole and Sim Turley that the sheriff would be after them."

Chad laughed. "It doesn't make any difference now," he said. "I was with Mullan a good part of the afternoon. He went all through the country where the shootings happened, checking every hen track. But from the things he said, he didn't see anything that made Allie out a liar."

He paused. "When I left him, he said he was going to Cole's and take him in if he was still around. If not, he was going to see Sim and his crew. He didn't sound exactly pleased with Sim, neither."

"Well?"

"He won't find the crew," Chad said. "They're already in the hills, waiting for the next move."

"When is that going to be?" Horneman demanded. "How much longer do we wait?"

"I told you before it would be soon. And it's started, hasn't it? It'll be finished quick too, the day after Cole is put in jail."

"That will be tonight if that fool of a sheriff ever comes back to arrest him," Horneman retorted. "And if Allie doesn't shoot him first. I had to stop that crazy kid from using his gun right on the main street, when Cole was taking Carson to the doctor."

"Allie won't be bothering us much longer," Chad said. He made a chuckling sound. "I hear you helped Cole give Allie a lesson in law."

Horneman matched the chuckle. "I didn't discourage Cole from walking out on Allie. And if the sheriff has any kind of evidence at all, he can add resisting arrest to Cole's crimes." His smile was faint in the darkness. "I thought it would be a good way to have the sheriff a little angrier at Cole than he was this afternoon."

"It all helps," Chad said. He leaned forward. "Now when Cole's arrested, you jaw at the sheriff some more. Then sit

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tight in town. If Cole is put in jail tonight, *don't* go riding on Tepee tomorrow, especially around dark."

"What's going to happen?"

"You'll learn that quick enough," Chad replied. "Once that Tepee herd is taken care of, it won't take me long to get the news to town. And once people hear what happened, they'll form a posse quick. We want to be sure and be around for that, to be sure those crazy cowhands accidentally find where Riddell and Tige Parker are hiding. That will take care of them."

"I hope your plan works," Horneman said slowly. "It's still got too many 'ifs' for my liking."

"It's worked so far, hasn't it?" Chad demanded.

"What if the sheriff lets Cole out too, after he hears that something has happened to the Tepee herd? Or what if Cole breaks out? He'll be wild enough to."

"Let him," Chad said indifferently. "Who can tell who's shooting who once we get a couple dozen mad possemen lost in the high hills? I wouldn't even be surprised if something happened to Sim Turley too."

"I'll be relieved when it's over," Horneman confessed. "I just hope Mullan gets back tonight before Cole decides to leave Healy's and ride home. I don't want to have to wait another full day."

"I'll see that Cole stays around until Mullan arrives," Chad said. He grinned savagely in the darkness. "It will be a pleasure to see that he stays put. A real pleasure."

Turning the sorrel, he put spurs to it, sending it lunging toward town.

Horneman returned by another route. He rode slowly, thinking about Cole Pender. At first he had liked the man, but as he saw more and more people who had been afraid of Cole's return change their minds and turn their talk in his favor, Horneman began to understand Chad's insistence that they get rid of Cole. And today, when Myra had risked Mullan's legal wrath by riding to warn Cole, Horneman decided that the sooner Cole was taken care of the safer the plans would be.

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He wanted to stop and see if Myra had returned, but he went to Healy's instead, drawn by a desire to find out what Chad intended to do to keep Cole in town until the sheriff came to arrest him.

### XII

COLE FINISHED the supper he had made from Healy's free lunch and pushed his plate away. He wondered if he was being wise by taking the risk of staying around town this way. He had fluffed Allie easily enough, but Mullan would be a different matter. He knew how far he could go without risking a court suit.

Besides, Cole thought sourly, what difference would it make once he was in jail? By the time a lawyer could help him, everything would be finished. The raiders had obviously started their big move; the attempt to kill Carson showed that.

Cole pulled his coffee mug forward. He was sure that the raiders would strike next at Tepee, at the herd of prime, fancy stuff. Cole was the big threat against their success now. Break him and any money support he could give Arrow would be gone. And that would leave only the C/L, to be pulled down at their leisure.

It struck him suddenly that this business of his going to jail might be more than just a series of circumstances without too much connection between them. Until now he had thought of Smitty's being shot as the raiders' effort to keep the little coward from saying too much. But what if Smitty had been trapped too? What if he had been sent to shoot at Carson when he was bound to be caught. Whoever ran the raiders had shown a thorough knowledge of the way the people in Gunsight thought and acted. Then that person would have guessed that Cole would try to take Smitty to jail and had lain in wait to kill the little man.

And the sheriff's actions would be predictable too, Cole thought. Now Allie's story took on more meaning. It was

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something else besides a boy's attempt at revenge. It could well be part of the over-all plan—the plan that would see Cole in jail and Tepee only half defended.

If this was true, then Allie might well be part of the raiders! Cole frowned. If so, then Allie was destroying the very thing he must want badly—his share of the C/L.

A chair creaked as Shorty French lowered himself into it. "Myra got back," he said to Cole. "She couldn't find Sim. There wasn't anybody at Arrow." He ran a hand over his face. "You think Mullan got him already?"

"More likely Riddell and Tige Parker took to the hills when they got word about Smitty, and Sim went after them," Cole said worriedly.

"He can take care of himself," Shorty said, catching the note of concern in Cole's voice. "He knows them hills better'n anybody." He added bluntly, "If I was you, I'd cut and run. I heard what you did to Allie tonight. The sheriff won't get fooled so easy."

"I'd rather be a free man than a hunted one," Cole answered. "I came here thinking Sim might walk in and to let the folks know I didn't murder Smitty."

He glanced around the room. The saloon was only half full, a number of men having walked out when Cole came in. But the rest had stayed, making it plain that their sympathies lay with him instead of Allie or Mullan.

"You made your point," Shorty retorted. "Now it's time to get riding. Sooner or later, the sheriff will bring Sim in. With both of you in jail, the raiders'll have an easy time of it."

"If Sim's alive to be brought in," Cole said. He had wondered earlier why the shots hadn't brought Sim to Tepee.

"I tell you Sim's able to take care—" Shorty broke off, his gaze swinging toward the batwing doors.

Chad Leeman swaggered in, his California finery glittering under the overhead lamps. "There's going to be trouble," Shorty murmured. "I know that look on his face."

Cole was conscious of Chad's eyes on him. He swallowed the last of his coffee. "Go see that folks keep quiet, will you?" he asked. "If Chad starts anything, I'll handle it by myself."

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Shorty rose and drifted toward the back of the room where his crew clustered around the pool tables. The room had grown suddenly quiet, and Shorty's bootheels clattered loudly as he moved from group to group with a meaningful glance.

Chad strode to the bar and planted himself with his left elbow hooked over it. From that angle he could continue to stare at Cole, seated at a small table against the far side wall.

"Feeding murderers these days, Healy?"

"You setting yourself up as a jury?" Healy countered.

Anger slitted Chad's eyes. Cole came to his feet and strode toward the bar. "Don't make trouble for yourself," he counselled Healy.

He wanted to bring this to a head. He was tired of the accusations and prejudgments of men like Chad Leeman. And those of others like him—the sheriff and some of the townsmen who had obviously accepted Allie Callahan's word without question, despite everyone's knowing that he was a liar and a sneak.

He stepped closer to Chad. "Whatever you've got to say, say it to me," he challenged.

Chad's grin was cool and mocking. "I figured to wait until Sim showed up. Why waste time saying it twice?"

The mocking grin told Cole what he wanted to know—Chad had braced him in order to start this fight. He saw the old, almost forgotten gleam of anticipation in Chad's eyes. The gleam that meant Chad was starting already to work himself up to a murderous pitch.

Well, he had wanted to bring matters to a head with Chad, Cole thought. And it didn't look as if he'd have any trouble doing so.

"I thought you were holding back until the law could come in and protect you," Cole taunted.

Chad needed no further excuse. He leaped forward and swung at Cole. He moved swiftly, a rock-hard, club-fisted fighter. His knuckles caught Cole high on the cheek, splitting the skin, sending Cole reeling back. He stumbled, caught

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himself and went sideways, his back coming hard against the bar.

Chad moved in quickly, fists cocked, eyes gleaming as he sought the best places to inflict punishment. Cole shook his head, clearing the mist from his eyes. Chad had moved faster than he expected, faster than he had ten years ago. Cole lifted an arm, blocking a vicious right. He twisted, taking a hard left on the shoulder. The force of the blow had thrown Chad slightly off balance, and Cole moved out. His fists hammered against Chad's ribs, momentarily forcing him back, making him give ground enough for Cole to maneuver.

No one spoke or moved. Healy laid a sawed off shotgun on the bar top as a warning to anyone who took it into his head to interfere.

Chad stepped in to force Cole back against the bar. Cole held his ground and they stood toe to toe, slugging at each other's bodies, making no effort at defense, each seeking to crush the other with the power of his fists. And now this was a fight dredged from the past when two half grown boys had mauled one another into near unconsciousness.

Chad's weight began to tell. Slowly Cole was forced to give ground. He maneuvered suddenly, putting an extra step between himself and Chad, giving himself room to catch Chad's driving fists on his arms instead of letting them punish his body.

Chad tried to move in under Cole's guard. Cole had an inch advantage and he used it to lick out a right that flicked Chad's nose, making him blink. Cole followed with a left and another right, twisting his knuckles against Chad's mouth. Chad spat blood and tried to bull forward, to make use of his weight again.

Cole hit him twice more, chopping at the skin over his eyes. Chad missed with a wild swing and gave ground. It was enough. Cole moved under Chad's flailing guard and ripped at his face, danced out again. Chad grunted and swung with seeming wildness. Cole darted in to slash at

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Chad's face. A grin twisted Chad's puffed lips as he brought his other hand up, crashing his fist against Cole's temple.

Cole went to one knee, cursing himself for being taken by an ancient trick. His vision was blurred and he was barely able to see Chad coming at him, boot swinging. Cole rolled and caught Chad's ankle. He twisted and Chad's own momentum lifted him off his feet. Sawdust spurted as his back slapped the floor.

Cole got to his feet and stood with arms hanging, sucking in deep draughts of air to clear his head. Chad rolled over and came to his feet slowly, warily. Blood ran from his ripped face. One eye was swelling shut. His mouth was twisted from Cole's punishing fists.

Chad shook his head and sagged, going down to one knee like a man hurt too badly to continue. Then he moved with that surprising swiftness. His hand slapped down and closed over the butt of his gun. He drew, swinging the muzzle up toward Cole.

Healy said clearly from behind the bar, "You drop that or I'll fill you full of buckshot, and even the sheriff would see that I got a medal."

Chad held the gun steady, but he made no effort to fire. He turned his head and his eyes blinked as he sought to focus on Healy. The shotgun barrels stared at him; he opened his fingers and let the .44 thud to the floor.

"I won't forget that," he said thickly.

Cole stepped forward and kicked the gun under a table. He took off his own belt and tossed it down. "Get up!"

Chad remained where he was, on one knee, the sole of his other boot pressed hard against the floor. "Get up and take your beating!" Cole lashed at him.

"No one beats me," Chad whispered. "Leastwise you!"

He thrust with his bootsole, levering himself forward and up, driving Cole down with his shoulder. They fell together with Chad on top. He lifted a fist to smash into Cole's unprotected face.

For an instant they were eye to eye. Cole saw the gloating expression, the deep satisfaction, and something else, un-

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definable, lurking deep at the back of Chad's eyes. And suddenly he knew. He had no proof, but he needed none. Chad's thoughts lay naked for Cole to read.

Chad Leeman was the force behind the raiders! Cole thought of the blow to the pride of a man like Chad, having a woman control twice as much of the C/L as he did, and a woman who had more than once turned aside his arrogant courting. And he thought of the driving hunger to be a big man that had always marked Chad. And now Allie being a part of this made more sense to Cole. Chad, more than anyone, would be in a position to promise the boy his share of the ranch, to egg him on to seek his independence from Myra.

But what could they hope to gain? Chad knew Gunsight well enough to realize that he couldn't ride roughshod over others and be allowed to stay. This was no raw frontier where a rangehog could take over and rule simply because he was rich and powerful. So getting Teepee and Arrow wasn't the answer, not by itself. But what then was Chad after?

Slowly Cole rolled on his shoulder blades to bring an arm into a better position. To distract Chad, he whispered, "You'll never do it—you and Allie and your hired hardcases."

The surprise that swept over Chad's face was as clear as any words. Then the expression was gone and his fist smashed down. Cole moved the arm he had freed, blocking the blow, feeling it jar him to the shoulder. Chad reared back and came down, his thumbs driving for Cole's eyes. The violence of the move threw his body forward. Cole brought up a knee, knocking Chad sideways, off him.

They came to their feet together. Cole saw that his last taunt had touched a deep nerve. Now Chad's expression cried that he wanted to kill, and to kill quickly. He stepped in, swinging a wild fist that carried all of his weight behind it.

Cole leaned aside and let Chad's own violence carry him within range. He smashed at Chad's face with savage knuckles. Chad caught himself and turned. Cole was waiting and his fists ripped out, tearing already battered flesh. Chad staggered back. Cole kept the pressure on, forcing him

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further back, chopping at his face coolly, methodically, relentlessly.

Chad was hurting. He swung but there was no fury in his blows. Cole ducked the wild fists easily and kept ripping at Chad's face. One eye was fully closed now; the other was a puffy mass of purpling flesh. His mouth was shapeless. His smashed nose dripped blood steadily. His breath began to come in sick, gulping gasps. He hit the bar with his back and hung there, hands down, helpless.

Cole pulled back his fist for the final, smashing blow that would drive Chad to the floor. He dropped his hand and turned away. "You aren't worth killing," he said contemptuously. He stepped to one side and signalled Healy for whiskey.

Horneman had been standing quietly by the rear door. He came forward and took Chad's arm. "He needs the doctor," Cole said.

"And you?"

Cole could feel his cuts and bruises beginning to burn and ache. His muscles were leaden but his head was clear. "I'm fine," he said.

He frowned as Horneman moved away. He wondered if he had seen right, if that had been a finger of fear laying its shadow across Horneman's eyes. Then Horneman was gone, leading Chad as he would a blind man.

Talk started up in the saloon. Cole finished his whiskey and walked to where his gunbelt lay. He was reaching down when the talk died abruptly. He looked up to see the sheriff pushing through the batwing doors, his gun in his hand.

"I just saw Chad," he said to Cole. "How many men do you try to kill in one day?" He jerked his head. "Come along. The cell door's still open—the way you left it."

Healy laid the shotgun back on the bar. From the edge of his vision, Cole saw Shorty French and his men move slowly forward, hands on their guns.

Cole considered accepting their help. From the expression on Mullan's face he knew that whatever he might try to say

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in his own defense would have no meaning. The sheriff had already decided his guilt. He looked again at the stubborn, set features. Mullan would fight. And Cole knew that he couldn't risk these men killing or being killed by flouting the law.

He made a definite motion with his head and lifted his hands. "All right, sheriff."

### XIII

COLE LAY wakefully on his cell cot. The office beyond the bars was empty and quiet. A smirking Allie had gone off to make the night rounds of the saloons, and Mullan had left to take care of Smitty's body and then have himself a late supper at the hotel.

The soft click of the front door opening brought Cole to his feet. He saw Myra step in and come quickly toward him. She was wearing a dress again, and every hair was perfectly in place. She hardly seemed the same woman who had ridden earlier to Tepee to bring him a warning.

"Cole?"

"I'm fine." Her hands came through the bars and he took them. And in their touch, he felt her love for him. He forced himself to remember that there could be nothing between them until this business was settled, and he pulled his hands away.

"Have you heard anything about Carson?" he said into the tight silence between them.

"You might try thinking about yourself first for a change," she murmured. Then she smiled. "He's going to be all right. The doctor said he'd be in bed only two weeks or so." The smile went away. "I saw Chad when I went to the doctor's. Shorty had to cart him home in a wagon." There was no censure in her voice, only a statement of fact.

Cole wanted to tell her what he had discovered about Chad. But he held the words back. With no more proof

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than he had, accusing Chad would make him no better than those who had prejudged him.

He said, "Any news about Sim?"

"None," she replied. "Except that the sheriff made it clear he's determined to put Sim in here with you."

"I know," Cole said. "I talked to Mullan before he went to supper. I told him my story and that I thought Sim was out in the hills hunting down his crew. But Mullan didn't want to listen. He prefers to believe Allie."

"I don't know whether he believes Allie or not," she said. "But he's using that story as an excuse to keep you and Sim locked up so you won't have a chance to take the law into your own hands."

"He's the law here," Cole said sourly. "And he's going to keep on being the law—him alone—if it wrecks Gunsight Valley."

Anger colored her cheeks. "If enough of us get together tomorrow, we can force him to stop being so stubborn, so bullheaded, force him to let you loose, if only to protect yourself and what's yours."

Before Cole could answer, the door opened and Mullan stepped in. He stared coldly at Myra. "When I want my prisoners visited, I'll let you know," he said tartly.

"This is a public office, Sheriff. I happen to be part of that public," she replied.

Cole said softly, "Save your breath, Myra. Nothing you say can help. His mind is made up."

Mullan was getting old, but his hearing was still sound. "I told you before that I rode those canyons most of the afternoon. I didn't find any sign of that drygulcher you claim killed Smitty. There wasn't even an ejected carbine shell except where you were riding. There's nothing to prove your story. Nothing at all."

"When did they change the laws in this country, Sheriff?" Myra asked with deadly softness. "When did they start making a man prove himself innocent instead of having the law prove him guilty?"

Color drained from Mullan's face. "When you get your

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lawyer's papers, maybe I'll listen to you. Now get back where you belong!"

"I'll be back tomorrow," she said. She was looking at Cole, but her tone made the words sound like a threat against the sheriff. She marched out, her back stiff and uncompromising.

Mullan dropped into his desk chair. Cole said, "While you're playing God Almighty with the well being of this valley, Sheriff, has it ever occurred to you that Riddell or Tige Parker could have shot Sim the way Smitty shot Carson? Just how far into Arrow's hills did you ride?"

"I'm one man," Mullan cried. "I did what I could today. I'll look again tomorrow. I can't do more than that."

"Tonight you could have a dozen men hunting," Cole said. "I know those hills. I could be looking for Sim. But you have to do everything by yourself. You told me once not to make myself judge and jury and executioner. But in your bullheadedness, you're doing the same thing."

"I'm the law," Mullan said stubbornly. "I do things the way I think best. If they're wrong, the responsibility is mine."

"Will you pay for Sim's life? Will you return Arrow and Tepee and the C/L to their rightful owners after the raiders have destroyed them and taken them away?" Cole cried.

Mullan turned his back. Cole fought down the sickness of helpless anger. He stepped back and dropped onto his cot. He lay stiffly, seeking to control the wildness that made him want to tear at the cell bars with his bare hands.

Cole turned his face to the wall and shut his eyes. He heard Allie come in from his rounds, report that all was quiet, and then leave for the night. He heard the sheriff moving about, blowing out the lamps and settling himself on a cot. Cole smiled sourly. Mullan was taking no chances of losing his prisoner tonight.

The late rising moon flooded the cell and then rode on, leaving Cole in darkness. He fell into a restless sleep. The suddenness of his awakening was a shock, and he sat up with every muscle taut. He heard a soft hissing from the window, followed by a faintly whispered, "Señor Cole!"

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Rising, Cole listened to Mullan's snores, and then padded to the window. Julio stood outside. "Ay," he said. "Shorty French tells me what has happened. Nito is at the meadow still, but I bring your horse."

"*Gracias, amigo*," Cole said softly. "But the sheriff sleeps close by."

"I also have the extra gun," Julio said.

The prospect was tempting, but Cole remembered Myra's parting words to the sheriff. If she could bring enough pressure against him, he would have to free Cole tomorrow. Briefly, he explained this possibility to Julio. "I'd rather be a free man than a hunted one," he added, repeating what he had told Shorty earlier.

"Sí," Julio agreed. "But if the sheriff does not free you?"

"Then tomorrow I'll ask the Señorita Myra to send some help," Cole said. He was thinking of the winter wood yet to be cut and brought in, of the hay to be moved to the feed lots, of the constant guard that had to be kept on the herd. It was impossible for Julio and Nito to do these things alone.

The sheriff's snoring stopped abruptly. Cole whispered, "If I am not home by dark tomorrow, we will talk of this again."

Mullan's cot creaked. Cole made a motion with his hand. "*Ride, amigo*."

Julio slipped away into the darkness. Mullan came striding to the cell door. "What's going on there?" he demanded.

"I was giving one of my Tejanos instructions," Cole said frankly. "In case you've forgotten, I run a ranch. There's work to be done."

Mullan grunted and turned away. He lit a lamp and pulled on his boots. Returning to the cell door, he held the lamp high, searching the cell with red-rimmed eyes. After a moment he went outside. Cole returned to the cot and lay quietly listening to the sheriff as he made a careful check of the alley and the window opening onto it. Finally he came back in, blew out the lamp, and returned to bed.

Cole lay awake, thinking of the work to be done at

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Tepee, but mostly thinking of the raiders. If he was right, at least two of them could move around freely, without suspicion—Chad and Allie. That meant that even if Sim somehow managed to bottle up Riddell and Tige Parker, an attack could still come.

Cole fell into another fretful sleep, galled by his own helplessness.

By mid-morning, Cole realized that his hope of being set free was an empty one. A delegation led by Myra and Horneman had been sent away. Shortly after, the sheriff himself rode off, leaving Allie in the office.

At noon Myra brought Cole his dinner and remained to talk. Allie pointedly stood close enough to listen. Myra ignored him. "Raul and I have been thinking of bringing a lawyer up from Reno," she said.

Cole started to say, "By the time he gets here it will be too late," but Allie's presence held back the words. He said, "I wouldn't take the trouble. My main concern is getting some help for the Tejanos. If you could get Shorty and some of his boys to help with the chores—"

Myra nodded and left, obviously bothered by Allie's presence. Cole ate his dinner and then slept in an effort to drain away the last of the weariness still gripping his bruised body. He wanted all the strength he could get in case he needed it tonight.

The sheriff returned at sunset. "No sign of Sim," he snapped in answer to Cole's question. "My guess is that he's holed up somewhere with Riddell and Tige Parker."

Cole made no effort to answer. Words in defense of Sim would be as futile as those in defense of himself. Mullan was obviously worried that he might have made a mistake about Sim, and this only forced him to greater stubbornness.

Cole lay on his cot, watching dusk slip in through the cell window. Allie spoke at some length to Mullan, in a voice too low for Cole to hear, and then went off. Shortly, Cole heard him crooning to his paint as he rode it up the alley.

With darkness, the first light of the rising moon began to

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show along the eastern mountains. Cole's supper was brought. After he ate, Mullan went to the hotel for his supper, locking the office behind him. He had been gone less than five minutes when the hissing sound he had heard last night took him quickly to the window.

Julio sat his horse close to the bars. An apparition was beside him—a haggard face, body slumped in the saddle.

"Sim!" Cole whispered. "What—"

"Later," Sim said. "Listen to what Julio here's got to say."

"There is something wrong," Julio said quickly. "The Señor Hornèman has gone and—"

"Horneman?"

"Sí. He came this afternoon from the Señorita Myra to guard the cows while Nito and I work the hay. But with the darkness he comes by the house and explains to us that the sheriff has sent the boy—the brother who lies about you—to watch the meadow."

"Allie!" Cole exploded. Allie guarding his herd! It was like asking a hungry wolf to watch over a flock of sheep. Now Cole could guess the meaning of Allie's low-voiced talk with the sheriff earlier.

The raiders' plan began to take shape in Cole's mind. With him in jail, Carson in the hospital, and the Tejanos lulled into security because the sheriff's own man was standing guard, Riddell and Tige could strike without fear.

"We have to get to the meadow, fast!" Cole whispered. "Break open the alley door, Julio. If anyone tries to stop you—"

"I know how to get in," Sim interrupted. He dropped from his horse and hurried, stumbling, to the heavy plank door that opened onto the alley. Julio followed closely, his hand out as if he thought he might have to prop Sim up at any moment.

The sound of a gun butt crashing against the lock was sharp on the night air. The moon appeared over the rim of the mountains, throwing its cold light down on the door swinging open. Sim disappeared and a moment later came into the office. He hurried toward the sheriff's desk.

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Lamp light showed him clearly to Cole for the first time. His lean face was etched deeply with weariness. Long scratches covered with dried blood showed through rips in his clothing on his hands. A blood-soaked bandanna was wrapped around his upper left arm.

He found the keys and came toward Cole's cell. As the lock clicked over, Cole said, "You'd best get to the doctor." He swung the door wide.

"What for? So he can count my bruises?" Sim snapped. "I got a score to settle with them jokers. They shot my horse out from under me when I was hanging on the edge of a canyon way up near the Pass. They must of thought the fall killed me; they didn't wait to look. But I caught a tree about thirty feet down. That was last night. I couldn't get back up and I couldn't see nothing, so I had to wait until today to climb to the bottom of that canyon. It took me all day and most of the evening to get home. I grabbed a horse and started for town and ran into the boys here."

Cole was hunting for his gun and belt. He found them in the bottom drawer of Mullan's desk, strapped them on, and led the way outside. Nito came from the shadows, leading the roan. His eyes gleamed with the excitement of this. Cole helped Sim into his saddle and then mounted.

He looked worriedly at Sim. "We'll make better time through the hills," he said. "But it's a hard ride."

"This is my fight tool" Sim retorted. "Besides, if they get away from us, I have an idea where their hide-out is."

He started off, stopping any further argument. Cole sent the roan around him and led the way through the brightening night into the hills back of the town.

No sounds of pursuit followed them. But Cole knew that the hunt would be on once Mullan returned from supper and found the empty cell. And he would have no trouble knowing which way Cole and his men had gone.

## XIV

HORNEMAN SAT his black at the edge of the meadow and watched the herd of blooded beef grazing placidly in the quickening dusk. They were beautiful animals, and he was sorry that they had to be pawns in this business.

A rider coming turned him in the saddle. He saw Chad Leeman's sorrel pull up at the edge of a tongue of timber and he rode that way. Chad's face was purpled and bruised, his mouth and nose so swollen that he talked only with an effort. The anger in his eyes was murderous.

"Have any trouble with those Tejanos?"

"None," Horneman replied. "I told them that Mýra sent me to help, and that Shorty and his crew would be along tomorrow."

Chad nodded and winced at the movement. "Allie will be along soon," he said. "When you ride out, make sure the Tejanos see you. Tell them the sheriff sent a man to stand guard until daylight. Figuring that the law is helping out should make them sleep easy."

He twisted his mouth in a travesty of a smile. "Remember, be on hand when the posse is formed."

"Mullan is just as apt to go alone as ask for help," Horneman replied.

"When the time is right, I'll bring the news to town," Chad said. "If Mullan won't get up a posse, we'll do it ourselves. But when he hears what the raiders have done, I don't think he'll turn down all the help he can get." A laugh grated out of him. "Even Cole will be along." He laughed again, turned the sorrel, and rode away. Horneman watched him go, noticing that he was heading for Arrow and not the C/L. Then he returned to his post.

Well before the moon cleared the mountains, Allie rode up to the small fire Horneman had made. He was expecting to see the Tejanos and Horneman's presence surprised him.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

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"Helping out Cole," Horneman replied stiffly.

Allie laughed. "To get in good with my sister, you mean. You should be helping hang him, Horneman. You'd have more chance with her if he was out of the way."

Horneman walked to the black, hiding a thin smile. Allie might not know it, but he was close to being right. Before this night was done, Cole would be out of the way. But Allie would never know it; he wouldn't be around to have that satisfaction.

Mounting, Horneman rode back to the fire. "Mullan sent you?"

"You think I'd be helping Tepee if he hadn't?" Allie demanded.

With a nod, Horneman rode away, taking the trail to Tepee where he hoped to find the Tejanos.

Allie built up the fire to warm himself against the chill of the mountain night. He put the paint well back, onto a small patch of grass in the nearest tongue of timber. He left it saddled in case things happened more quickly than he expected. He made coffee with the gear he carried in his saddlebags and sprawled back, smoking and turning over in his mind the plans for the night.

He chuckled as he thought how easy it had been to talk Mullan into ordering him to stand guard over this herd. He laughed aloud as he recalled his brief meeting with Chad late last night. By God, Cole had given him a good beating. He looked as if he'd tangled with a band of mountain lions.

Allie stopped laughing as he considered the plan Chad had laid out. He was to take a crack on the head, just enough of one to raise a lump that would convince people he'd been attacked. Then he was to lie doggo while the herd was driven over the pass and into the California mining country. Allie chuckled. Cole might as well stay in jail. According to Chad, Sim had fallen to his death in the deep canyon. Without Sim, without his beef, Cole would have nothing!

Allie finished his coffee and lay back, letting the fire burn down, his eyes fixed on the eastern mountains. The moonlight

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was growing brighter. Soon the moon itself would come up. That would be the signal for things to start.

Allie heard horses coming across the meadow. He sat up and threw a dry stick on the fire. It blazed high and he moved back toward the tongue of timber, burying himself in shadow until he could be sure who the riders were. The thought of the crack on the head tensed his muscles. It wasn't anything he looked forward to, but what was a sore skull compared to what lay in his future!

The blow came without warning. Allie was watching the riders moving slowly toward the firelight and he failed to hear the man creeping up behind him. The shock of the gun butt smashing down through his hat sent him sprawling forward onto his face. He rolled over and lay still, his body numb, his mind filled with thick haze.

Dimly he heard the sounds of men coming closer to him, and he recognized Chad's voice. "I told you not to hit him too hard."

"I only gave him a tap," Riddell replied.

"Be sure he's out," Chad ordered. "If he isn't, tap him again. I don't want him awake until everything is set."

"I can tie him up," Tige Parker offered.

"And let someone find rope marks on his wrists?" Chad replied scathingly. "He's supposed to die a hero, trying to save Cole's beef."

Riddell laughed and moved toward the sprawled body. The fog was still thick in Allie's head, but not so thick that he couldn't understand the meaning of Chad's words. They were going to kill him somehow. He wanted to surge up, to fight, but when he heard Riddell's footstep, he had the presence of mind to lie still, his mouth slack and his eyes lightly closed.

Riddell's breath stank as he peered into Allie's face. "He's sleeping nice and easy," Riddell said. "He won't wake up for an hour or better."

"We'll need all of that to get the job done," Chad said. His voice sharpened. "All right, Tige, go down and start taking that piece of fence away from the mouth of the draw.

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Riddell and I'll start rounding up the herd. Remember, don't cut the wires. We want to be able to put the fence back up once the last of the stock is inside it."

"I know what to do," Tige said nervously.

"Have you got the torches?" Chad snapped.

Allie slitted his eyes. The men were at the far edge of the firelight but the moon was high enough now for him to have a good view of all three.

He watched Riddell hand two pitchpine torches to Chad and one to Tige Parker. Torches? Cattle in the draw? What the devil was going on, Allie wondered.

Riddell was tucking two torches for himself into his saddlebags. "I still think the way you told Allie we were going to do it is best," he complained to Chad. "Hell, these cows'll bring good money in the gold camps."

"And they'd land you both in jail," Chad replied angrily. "You can't blot a Tepee brand easily, and no one but a fool would buy blooded stock without asking a lot of questions. The easy days in the gold camps are gone. The law is there now.

"Besides," he went on, "there'll be a lot more money for you than a few head of beef will bring."

"I know where to sell the herd," Riddell argued. "We could have the money from it and our share of the rest too."

Chad swore at him. "Do you think a little rustling will stir up the sheriff? No, but what we're going to do will. We want him and everybody else worked up enough so that he has to let Cole out of jail to ride with him."

He swung into the saddle. "All right, let's get moving. Tige, as soon as Riddell and I get the beef inside the draw, put the fence back loose. Then come here and get Allie on his horse and bring them up there, fast. Run him well into the herd and then get back and make sure the fence is solid. Pile your brush inside it and wait. Riddell and I'll be riding for the upper end of the draw. We'll throw our torches down there. As soon as you see fire going, light your brush and hightail it."

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He turned to Riddell. "You'll be on the north rim above the draw. Once your fire is going good, head for the hills. I want you both to have the trap set as quick as you can. Once I'm sure everything is going right, I'll ride for town to spread the news. Cole and Mullan will be in the trap before daylight."

He laughed thickly. "I'll be with them, so be sure I'm out of the way before you spring the trap!"

Every nerve in Allie's body screamed at the horror of this. He could hear the cattle bawling out their fear, their pain. He could smell the stench of their scorched bodies. He could picture them running down the draw, fleeing the flames, only to find more fire blocking them. He could feel their fright as they turned back, milling and bawling in their confusion, trampling one another, and finally succumbing to fire that squeezed them like the jaws of a vice.

And he and the paint would be in the midst of the terror-stricken mass.

His desire was to leap up, to shoot down Chad and Riddell and Tige Parker. With an effort that took more will than he had ever before used, he held himself quiet. What was one against three? They would destroy him and go on about their business. He lay drenched in his own sweat, not daring to move.

Tige Parker rode off. Chad motioned to Riddell. "Let's start pushing those cows. It'll take a while to make them leave this grass for the draw."

Riddell's gusty laugh was like a knife through Allie's brain. "Barbecue on the hoof," he joked.

They rode out into the meadow. Allie made himself lie still a few more minutes, afraid the two men in the meadow might see him if he moved. Finally his nerves gave way and he felt that he had to do something or go crazy.

He rolled onto his belly and began to crawl toward the nearest timber. The rough ground tore through his clothing and gouged his skin. Every movement increased the throbbing in his head, and twice he had to stop and turn aside to rid himself of the dregs of coffee in his stomach.

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When he could stand it no longer, he leaped up and staggered to the trees. He flung himself into their protective darkness, his muscles cringing at the thought of a bullet driving into his back. But the sounds of Chad and Riddell hoorawing the beef up the meadow did not change. Allie leaned against a tree, trying to steady his spinning vision. With a final effort, he hurried to the waiting paint and climbed into the saddle. The sudden spurt of energy drained away, leaving him dizzy and gasping. He slumped forward, fighting the blackness threatening to crash over his head, cursing himself for his own weakness.

When he was able to sit upright, he touched his heels to the paint. "Move, fellow, move," he whispered.

He stayed into the timber until he was over the ridge and then he cut to the trail. The paint picked its way through the stark moon shadows, keeping up a steady pace as if sensing some of the urgency that drove Allie.

He was clinging to the horn when the horse trotted into Tepee's yard. The house was dark, with a feel of emptiness about it. Allie knew without having to call out that there was no one here. Cole's Tejanos were gone.

He started toward the C/L and stopped, remembering that this was Saturday night; Shorty and his men would be in town. The ranch would be deserted.

Sobbing in frustration, Allie rode the rough trail to the valley. He had no other choice now. He had to go to town for help.

How long did he have? He judged it would take Chad and Riddell close to an hour to get the cattle all into the draw and up to its far end. Then they would need time to ride out and follow the rim trails to where they intended to light the brush with their torches. Counting the time he had spent coming this far, he had at the most an hour.

He forced the paint to greater speed, despite the painful jar each step sent roaring through his head. Once on the valley floor, he coaxed the horse to a ground-eating lope. He clung grimly to the saddle, fighting to stay conscious long enough to reach Gunsight.

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He reached town and started toward the jail. Fear jolted through him. If he told the sheriff, he would be put in jail. If he could find someone else to tell, he might be able to hide away and rest until he had strength enough to go after Chad.

He swung away from the street and into the alley. At the stable, he half fell, half stepped from the saddle. He turned the paint into the building, hoping the boy working there would have sense enough to take care of it. Then he staggered to the rear door of the hotel and slipped inside.

He moved into the corridor and braced himself against the wall while he looked toward the lobby. Knots of people moved about, their voices filled with excitement, but he could not make out their words. He saw Horneman and lifted a hand to attract his attention. As Horneman came toward him, he stumbled out of sight to the foot of the rear stairs. Horneman reached him, surprise stamped on his hawk-like features.

"Chad and his raiders are driving Cole's herd into the draw at the meadow," Allie whispered. His voice was faint and thin to his own ears. "He's going to burn them to death. Warn the sheriff, but don't let him know I'm here. I got to go hide."

Horneman's hands were strong under his armpits as he went to his knees. "Let's get you to your room," Horneman said. "No one will find you there for a while."

With Horneman's help, Allie moved up the stairs and down the hall to his room. The door was unlocked, the key on the inside. Allie sprawled on his bed, panting. Horneman lit a lamp and came toward him.

Allie's eyes widened as he saw the cold anger of Horneman's expression, saw the gun he was holding. "You crazy fool kid, losing your nerve!" Horneman whispered. "You'll ruin everything!"

He thrust the gun against Allie's belly, caught up a pillow, and pressed it over his hand to deaden the sound of the shot. He fired as Allie heaved up and away in an effort to escape.

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The smash of the bullet tore away the last of Allie's consciousness.

He awakened to a feeling of wet warmth. His side hurt and his hand went there to find the stickiness of his own blood. And now he remembered.

Horneman had shot him and left him for dead. How long ago? He focused his gaze on the lamp. It was nearly full of oil. He could not have been unconscious over a few minutes at most. He crawled off the bed, crying out as pain swept through him. But he kept moving, knowing that he had to find Myra. She would help him.

He staggered to the door. It was locked and the key was gone. Sobbing in pain and frustration, Allie pulled his gun and fired at the lock. His hand was shaking badly and he missed. He held his gun wrist with his other hand and fired again. The bullet ripped the lock apart. Allie hit the door with his shoulder and stumbled into the hall. Voices called out from below and loud footsteps rang on the stairs. He straightened up and saw Myra with the desk clerk close behind her. He turned and stumbled back into the room and sprawled over his bed.

He heard her say, "It's Allie!" Her fingers rolled him onto his back. "He's been shot! Get a doctor, quick. And keep people away."

The clerk's footsteps hammered down the hall. Allie opened his eyes. "Chad and his raiders are going to burn Cole's cattle in the draw. . . . Warn the sheriff!"

"Chad?" she whispered in surprise. "Chad is with the raiders?"

"He runs them," Allie answered. "Get the sheriff."

"Cole escaped some time ago," she said quickly. "Mullan is after him." She put a soothing hand on Allie's forehead. "Cole will go to the meadow."

Allie scarcely heard her. There was more that he had to say, but his mind was too filled with pain for him to remember it now. He closed his eyes and sagged back into darkness.

## TROUBLE AT GUNSIGHT

### XV

COLE LED THE way along the ridges behind the C/L to the south slope above the meadow. They moved swiftly along the narrow trail, guided by the hard, bright moonlight. They saw no one except for a single rider racing across the valley toward Gunsight.

"That horse moves like Allie's paint," Sim Turley commented in a puzzled voice.

Cole slowed the roan for a better look but a rough stretch of ground took his attention. Once across that, they broke onto the ridge above the meadow. Cole nodded at the glowing coals of a small campfire. "There's Allie's—" He broke off, swearing. "The herd's gone!"

Sim lifted in the saddle, pointing west. "Look therel" he cried.

On the rim trails that ran above the draw lights flickered like giant fireflies dancing. Even as they watched another light sprang up, this one at the far end of the meadow.

Cole sent the roan hurrying downslope. Once on the meadow grass, he put it into a gallop and streaked west, the others pounding behind him. As he neared the fence that covered the bottleneck opening of the draw, the meaning of the nearer light became clear. Flaming torch in hand, a lean, bony rider was lighting a pile of brush stacked inside the wires.

"It's Tige Parker!" Cole flung back. He drew his .44 and fired at the rider. He jerked in the saddle and his torch fell from his hand into the brush on the north side of the bottleneck. Catching himself, Tige urged his horse toward the beginning of the north rim trail. Behind Cole, Julio lifted his carbine and fired. Tige Parker cascaded out of the saddle and sprawled on the ground at the edge of the meadow. He crawled to his knees, pulling at his handgun.

Cole swung the roan close, freeing one foot from the stirrup as he rode. He kicked Tige's wrist savagely, sending the

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gun spinning away. "Where's the herd!" he demanded. "What's the meaning of this?"

Light from the burning brush reached out to show the triumph stamping Tige's pain-twisted features. "You're too late," he gasped. "Your beef is frying in the draw!" He fell back with a choking sound of laughter.

Half the brush was on fire now, spitting and exploding to send sparks through the fence wires. Cole raced to the south end of the bottleneck, where the flames had not yet reached. Julio and Nito came on his heels, reaching down to dig wire cutters from their saddlebags. Sim took a look at Tige Parker, decided he was going nowhere, and followed Cole and the Tejanos.

Julio and Nito began snipping the wires. As they came loose, Cole and Sim caught them in their bare hands and dragged them to the side. With a third of the wires gone, Cole plunged forward and began tearing the packed brush out of the mouth of the draw. Julio moved in beside him, cursing in wild Spanish as a burning brand dropped down on his bare skin. Slowly, agonizingly the unburned section of brush was cleared away until, finally, a path was cleared into the draw.

Now they could see the cattle moving restlessly. Farther away the fireflies were dancing again. But they were larger now, turning into goutts of flame that spat upwards into the night. Cole ran for the roan. "Let's get those cows out before they panic and trample themselves to death!" He leaped into the saddle and drove the horse on the dead run for the opening in the brush.

He twisted in the saddle. "Nito, guard Tige Parker." He swung back, feeling the roan balk as heat from the nearby flaming brush blasted at them. But before the horse could make up its mind to rebel against the steel grip on its reins, it was through the opening and into the draw.

The cattle were bunched well up toward the end, milling and bawling restlessly. Beyond them the thick ground cover of dry brush was already on fire, burning violently and sending sparks swirling on a downdraft.

"Get behind them!" Cole ordered. He squeezed the roan between the edge of the herd and the north side of the draw. Suddenly flame leaped high, outlining Chad and Riddell, carbines in their hands. Chad fired and dirt spurted from the side of the draw into Cole's face. Both men began firing as he weaved the roan in the flickering light.

Cole drove between two frightened cows and then he was behind the herd. Sim came after him, carbine lifted as he raked the rims above with a steady fire.

"I'll keep 'em off balance," he shouted. "You work that beef!"

Cole saw Julio squeezing through on the far side. He cursed as a bull staggered against his horse, nearly knocking it down. The cattle were close to panic now, wild with the encroaching heat and the steady hammering of guns.

Cole heard Sim groan and turned in time to see him pitch half out of the saddle, catch the horn, and pull himself back up. A carbine cracked from above and Cole felt the shock of lead scouring his thigh. Teeth clenched against the sudden pain, he drove the roan at the rear of the crazily milling herd. Brush less than a dozen feet away was beginning to burn now.

"We'll cut out the leaders!" he called to Julio. He rammed the roan into the herd, seeking a lead bull. He found it and cut it toward the mouth of the draw. The bull bellowed in frantic fear as it stumbled forward, horns, tossing. Then it was free and galloping awkwardly eastward.

Cole swung out and alongside Julio, and together they worked the sides of the herd, straightening out those that tried to turn back, forcing them into the pattern that was forming behind the lead bull.

One cow went down as a bullet searched her out. But few shots now came close to the herd or the men. Cole glanced back to see Sim still firing. He left the cattle to Julio, pulled his carbine, and joined Sim. Chad and Riddell were already well back, driven away from the rim by Sim's deadly fire. Now they broke as a shot from Cole sent Chad's hat spinning into the night.

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"Ride for the hide-out!" Chad shouted over the crackling of the fire. A gust of smoke rose, obscuring the top of the draw. When it thinned, both men were gone.

Cole and Sim put carbines back in their boots and helped Julio force the tail end of the herd after the lead bull. It was in the bottleneck now. It tried to balk as heat from the hot gray ash of the burned brush blasted out at it. But pressure from behind forced it on and soon the entire herd was streaming into the meadow, galloping toward the cool safety of the east end.

The three men followed, gasping in relief as fresh air filled their smoke-scorched lungs. At the north edge of the grass, Cole made out two horses standing, their saddles empty. As he rode closer, he saw Nito kneeling, his .44 held steadily on Tige Parker, who lay with his hands curled over his belly.

Julio dropped from the saddle and ran to Nito. "Ay, *chico?*"

"He shot me with a hide-out gun," Nito grated through his teeth.

Cole could see blood seeping through Tige's fingers where he had them clamped over his middle. "It looks like you got even," he said. Suddenly the pain from his own wound washed through his scorched body. He felt himself falling. He reached for the horn and missed. He had no memory of hitting the ground.

When he came to, he was reminded of the aftermath of an Indian raid he had once fought in. Julio was the only man on his feet, and his face was a mask of white where he had spread salve over his blistered skin. Sim Turley lay on his back, one leg and his left hip heavily bandaged. Nito was bare-armed, his shirt sleeves having been used to wrap the shallow wound across his ribs. Cole looked down at himself and saw the bulky bandage that showed through a long cut in his Levis.

"You have only the bullet burn, Señor Cole," Julio said with weary cheerfulness. "I have put the salve on and the pain will soon stop."

"He is a walking hospital, that one," Nito said affection-

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ately, nodding at the saddlebags Julio carried over his shoulder.

Julio dug into the saddlebag and brought out a pint bottle of brandy. "It is good to be prepared," he said. He handed the bottle to Cole.

He drank, watched Julio help Sim take a sip, and then moved on to Nito. After he himself drank, the old man moved toward Tige Parker. Cole noticed that Tige still lay curled up, but blood no longer seeped through the fingers clasped across his belly. Julio knelt and then straightened up, moving away from Tige.

"Nito shot too well," he said. "This one is dead."

Cole swore under his breath. "Nito, did he say anything before he died?"

"He talks much," Nito agreed. "He brags at first, saying how you will all die in the draw. Then he begs me to take him to the doctor. He swears he will tell me where Chad and Riddell have the hide-out if I will do this. Before I can answer, he talks of a canyon three miles this side of the Gunsight Pass. There is a rock gut just before the beginning of the canyon. This gut, he tells me, is guarded but if we cross a shale slide to the right and go through some spruce trees, we can find the back of the canyon and sneak up on his friends. I do not believe him."

"I know that place," Sim said in a pain-filled voice. "He was telling the truth all right. The gut is a short piece past the ledge I fell over last night." He groaned as he shifted his position. "Did he say anything about a timber cruiser's marks all through the trees on the north slope of Arrow and Tepee?"

Nito looked puzzled and shook his head. "He said no more after he talked of the canyon."

Cole glanced toward Sim. "What's this about timber cruiser's marks?"

"I found them after I worked my way out of that deep canyon this morning," Sim said. "You remember the thick timber where I told you I had a survey made when I first came to this country?"

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"I remember," Cole said.

"I hired me a licensed timber cruiser," Sim went on. "I paid him big money to tell me that I had a fortune in lumber if there was any way to haul it out to where it could be sold, but that we was too far from the railroad. That was twenty years ago," he added.

He shifted weight off his hip. "But the marks I saw to-day wasn't no twenty years old. They were made sometime last year—about the time the trouble started."

He dropped his head back, his face drawn and pale. Cole wanted to ask more questions but he realized that this was no time for them. Carefully he stood up, testing his weight on his leg. It held and he limped to the roan. "Nito, take Sim to town. Explain everything to the sheriff. If he isn't around, tell the Señorita Myra. She'll find men to help us."

Nito's expression mirrored his disappointment. "Hurry," Cole commanded, "before Sim gets too far gone to ride." He motioned for Julio to mount his horse.

With Nito's help, Sim limped to his mount and slowly climbed into the saddle. He sagged forward, letting Nito gather in his reins. As Cole and Julio moved away, he called, "Watch out for a trap. It sounds to me like Tige was too eager to tell Nito how we could sneak up on his friends!"

"I know Chad," Cole said. "He'll have a trap for us there, if he doesn't have one set up sooner."

## XVI

WHEN HORNEMAN left Allie's room, he locked the door behind him and hurried outside through the alley door. He got his black from the stable and tied it in shadow at the rear of the jailhouse. Then he slipped back to the hotel to find out if anyone had heard the shot that killed Allie.

He was standing near the foot of the lobby stairs, relieved that no one paid particular attention to him, when the doctor hurried by him, followed by the desk clerk. Horneman caught the clerk by the arm.

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"What's going on?"

"Allie Callahan's been found shot," the man said. "Myra sent me for the doctor. From the look I had, I'd say the undertaker's what we need." He moved away.

Horneman stood still, debating whether to wait as Chad had ordered him or to ride now. If Allie was still alive and able to tell who shot him—

Myra came down the stairs, hurrying to Horneman. "Raul, Chad and his raiders shot Allie. He told me they're up in Tepee's meadow, that they're driving Cole's herd into the draw—to burn them to death!"

"Chad with the raiders!" he exclaimed.

"He runs them, Allie said. And Chad expects Cole to be set free once the news of the burning reaches town. He doesn't know Cole has already escaped, of course. And he has a trap set in the hills. Raul, Cole will ride right into that trap!" Pleading filled her voice. "You know the shortcuts. Could you ride and warn Cole. And tell him that Mullan is after him too. I'm going to find Shorty and the boys."

"They rode after Mullan," Horneman said. "I'll tell Mullan what happened if I see him. And don't worry about Cole. I'll find him in time."

He hurried out and up the alley. He found that he was shaking with relief as he climbed onto the black. Allie wasn't dead yet. If he talked any more, he would tell who shot him. Horneman realized that his only chance was to destroy Cole and then find Chad, and warn him that the plan had gone wrong. He had no idea what to do after that. He only knew that now he was fighting for his life.

He put spurs to the black and swung for the hills.

As soon as Horneman left, Myra hurried back upstairs, relief filling her at the thought that she had done something to help Cole. She entered Allie's room to find the doctor ready to leave. Allie was sitting up, and a little color had returned to his face.

"He's lost a lot of blood," the doctor said. "But the bullet didn't hit any vital spots. If anything, the crack on the head

did more damage than the shot." With a hurried remark about a baby waiting to be delivered, he scurried away.

Allie said, "Where's Mullan? I've got to tell him—"

Myra realized he must not have understood her before. "Cole escaped," she said. "The sheriff went after him. And Shorty and the boys have gone after the sheriff. But it's all right. I sent Raul to find Cole and warn him of Chad's trap."

"Horneman!" Allie cried. "He's the one who shot me! He's the other man Chad talked to after he killed Smitty!"

"But Raul was in town since early evening," Myra protested.

Hurriedly, Allie told her the entire story: how Chad had recruited him, how he had seen Chad kill Smitty; everything up to his trying to twist away from Horneman's gun. Beyond that, he recalled nothing.

Disgust welled up in Myra as she listened. Then it was gone. Whatever Allie might have been before, his actions tonight had made him something else.

"I'll try to reach Cole before Raul does!" she whispered, and hurried from the room. She changed to her riding clothes and ran to the stable for her dun.

The stableboy looked puzzled as he saddled the horse. "I heard Allie'd been shot," he said. "But a few minutes ago he rode off on a big dappled gray. He wanted his paint but it's plumb tuckered out."

The crazy little fool! Myra thought. But for the first time, she felt pride in her brother. She hurried the dun up the alley. Which way would be best to ride; she wondered. Horneman and Allie would follow the back trails, she was sure. She decided to take the road to Arrow and then follow a shortcut she knew that would bring her out near Gunsight Pass. If she hurried, she might still get ahead of Cole and the others.

As she spurred the dun to a gallop, the full meaning of Raul Horneman's actions struck her. He was one of the raiders! And she had sent him after Cole. In her effort to help, she had sent Cole his executioner!

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Cole and Julio were walking up a steep slope, leading their horses. Both animals were sorefooted from the rough rocks of the trail and tired from the hard riding they had taken this night. Cole limped along slowly, angry at his own helplessness.

The night grew colder as the altitude increased. The moonlight felt like white ice as it lay chill fingers along Cole's wounded leg. Finally he could go no further and he dropped close to a jumble of rock alongside the steep trail.

"There's a shortcut we could have taken," Cole said. "But the trail is worse than this. The horses never would have made it." He pointed upward. "It comes out just below the rock gut Tige spoke of."

"It does not matter," Julio said. "If those *hombres* have set the trap for us, they will be there waiting. We have the time for rest."

He moved about, gathering small sticks to build a fire. His saddlebags yielded equipment for brewing coffee. As the fire began to crackle, Cole moved closer, holding out his stiff leg to the heat. Soon the warmth seeped into him and he was able to lift his head and look around. The moon was sliding toward the western mountains, but it had a good distance to go yet. They could afford the time to rest.

When the coffee was ready, Julio brought two tin cups from his saddlebags and poured them full. He handed one to Cole, along with a chilled tortilla and a piece of jerky. After they had drunk some of the coffee, Julio insisted on pouring a little brandy into each cup.

Cole laughed at the quantity of things Julio carried in his saddlebags. He felt light-headed and he wondered if he could make the last mile that stretched between them and the rock gut. And once there, what? It was no country to sneak up on Chad. A man stationed on top of the gut could command the whole area downslope.

He smoked a cigaret with the last of the coffee and rose. The heat and the brandy had eased the stiffness of his leg. He gathered up the roan's reins and started upslope through a stand of dwarf spruce. Julio stopped him with a sudden low

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call. Cole heard the sounds of a rider coming now and he turned, drawing his forty-four.

The rider came into sight around the jumble of rocks. "It's Horneman!" Cole exclaimed. He holstered his gun.

Horneman rode quickly to them. "Thank God I found you in time," he said. "Allie came to town to warn us that Chad was going to burn your cattle. I saw Nito on the way here. He said you saved them."

"Then it was Allie we saw riding across the valley!" Cole said. "He came to warn us against Chad."

"And to let us know that Chad has a trap set for you up ahead," Horneman answered quickly. "It's in a canyon a mile or so from here."

"Tige told us where the hide-out was," Cole said.

Horneman looked surprised. Then he said, "Did he tell you how to avoid the trap?"

Cole grinned mirthlessly. "He tried to. But I figure that if we follow his directions, we'll walk into a gun."

He started walking again. The trail was wider here and Horneman rode the black alongside. "With three of us, maybe we can outmaneuver them," Horneman suggested.

"We'll know better when we get there," Cole said. He stopped, muttered an apology to the drooping roan, and pulled himself into the saddle. His leg was paining again and he knew that he would need all of its strength when they reached the rock gut.

A short distance on they came to a narrow ledge that thrust out over a deep canyon. They moved cautiously along it and onto a sloping flat. A little way beyond, they could see the trail disappear into a dark gut between high, flat-topped rocks.

Cole stopped. "It's there on the north that Sim found marks left by a timber cruiser." He motioned to the blackness of the canyon they had just skirted.

Horneman reined in. "Sim what?"

Cole explained. "It makes no sense, I know. But then Chad's doing all this makes no sense either. What can he hope to

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gain by taking Arrow and Tepee. Gunsight won't stand for a rangehog."

"Maybe he doesn't want range," Horneman said with an abrupt laugh. "Maybe all he wants is the timber." He nodded to the north. "You must have noticed the way the two forks of the river flow downslope and into that alkali sink just beyond the valley. A crew could cut Arrow and Tepee's timber and float it down to a mill on the edge of that sink without spending too much money."

"What for?" Cole demanded. "Even if there was a mill built down there, what good would the lumber be with no way to haul it to the railroad?"

A thin note of mockery threaded Horneman's voice. "But what if a railroad did come through this country on its way to the Oregon country?"

Before Cole could answer, Horneman started up the black. "Let's get closer to the gut to see what we can do."

Thirty yards from the gut, they paused again. On the right, the trail dropped off shallowly into a stand of small spruce. A ridge came angling down on the left, cutting into the main trail on a steep slope. Beyond the junction the ridge formed a wall; just back of it the ground dipped to form a hollow. Cole pointed to the ridge. "That's the short-cut I was telling you about," he said to Julio.

The old man grunted at the poor excuse for a trail that twisted up the ridge and out of sight. He cried, "Ay!" in sudden surprise. A figure had come into sight over the bone of the ridge and was staggering toward them.

Horneman swore and pulled his gun. Cole sent the roan forward, jarring the black so that Horneman's shot screamed high into the air.

"That's Myra!" Cole cried at him.

Her voice came faintly as she stumbled down the rough slope. "Watch out for Raul! He's one of the raiders. He shot Allie!" She tripped and fell forward, rolling toward them.

Cole swung toward Horneman, his hand reaching for his forty-four. He stopped and lifted his hands. He heard

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Julio's soft Spanish curse and knew that he had been caught too.

"Drop your guns on the ground," Horneman said sharply. He swung the muzzle of his .44 toward Myra, who was slowly picking herself up. "I can shoot her as easily as I can shoot you."

Cole let his .44 and his carbine drop to the trail. Behind him, Julio followed suit. Now Cole understood Horneman's remarks about the timber, and he understood why Horneman was able to "retire" so young. "You knew a railroad was coming through here!" Cole said. "You told Chad about it and he did the rest."

"Not all of it," Horneman said with boasting in his voice. "I hired Riddell and his crew." His eyes switched briefly to Myra and back. She was walking toward them. "Don't try anything foolish, my dear," he cautioned. "And listen to me. I want you to know that I condoned none of Chad's foolishness: that warning note to Cole Pender in Reno, the violence that happened tonight. But by agreeing to do as he said, I'll get half of a quarter of a million dollars worth of timber." He was looking at Cole but talking to Myra. "As my wife, you can be very wealthy."

She stopped less than six steps from the roan. She said, "I rode my dun into the ground. I had to leave him on the other side of the ridge. I didn't do it to marry the man who brought death to this valley!"

"You have little choice," Horneman said. "I'm sure Chad won't have any compunction about getting rid of the other owner of the C/L."

Cole was looking at Myra. He saw her eyes shift toward the guns lying on the ground. His head dipped in a faint nod. Without looking away from her, he kneed the roan, sending it forward. Cole straightened in the saddle. Horneman lifted his gun. The roan's shoulder hit the black, sending it dancing sideways. Cole launched himself from his stirrups. He heard the crack of Horneman's .44 and felt the bullet whip through his hat. Then he had his hands on Horneman and they crashed to the ground together.

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The impact jarred pain through Cole, washing blackness over him like a wave. He fought against it, rolling as Horneman's fist crashed down for his face. Then Horneman had rolled off and was running for the black. Cole saw Myra with his .44 in her hands. She fired as Horneman leaped into the saddle. The bullet scoured the horse on the rump, sending it into a wild run. Horneman reined it about and sent it deliberately racing for the girl.

Cole surged up, driving his boot toes into the ground and thrusting himself forward. He caught Myra about the waist and spun her backwards. The edge of the black's hoof raked his shoulder and then it was gone. A cry in Spanish was followed by the sound of a heavy body crashing to the ground. Cole righted himself and turned. The black had crashed into Julio's lighter horse, knocking it down and pinning the old man beneath it. Cole hurriedly pulled the horse aside, but Julio lay where he had fallen, one leg twisted at an odd angle.

"That *chingado cabrón* has broken my leg when he knocks over my *caballo*," Julio groaned.

A wild shout from Myra lifted Cole's head. Horneman was sawing at the reins but the black had his head up and was running blindly downslope. He was starting along the ledge hanging over the deep canyon. And coming from the opposite direction was Allie on the big dappled gray.

"Allie, watch out!" Myra cried.

Allie seemed to begin to rein in the gray. Then he leaned forward and kicked his heels into its flanks, driving for the onrushing black. The horses struck shoulder to shoulder. Allie left the saddle and wrapped his arms around Horneman. His weight pulled the bigger man from the saddle. For a long moment, they seemed to hang together into the air. Then they plummeted over the ledge and disappeared into darkness. The black fought for footing, missed, and crashed after them. The gray ran to safer ground and stood trembling.

"Allie did that deliberately," Myra whispered. She buried her face in her hands.

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Before the sound of her voice died, a rifle cracked sharply from the top of the gut. Lead struck the ground near Cole, sending rock spitting. He grabbed up a carbine and answered the shot. "Myra, get into that hollow!" he called.

She hesitated only long enough to scoop up the remaining guns, and then half dived, half rolled into the shallow hollow behind the junction of the two trails. She began to fire the carbine at the gut, covering Cole as he dragged Julio down into the hollow. A bullet nicked his heel as he slid off the trail.

Julio groaned as Cole lowered him to the ground. "Move me forward," he said. "I cannot shoot from here."

Cole pulled him alongside Myra and put a carbine in his hands. He took his .44 from Myra. She was squinting along the barrel of the other carbine. She fired. An answering shot screamed wildly into the air. From the top of the gut Riddell cursed loudly.

"The horses?" Myra asked Cole.

"They scattered," he said. "They're all right." He had a glimpse of white and shot at it. The white disappeared and a rifle sent dirt into his face.

"It's Chad, isn't it?" Myra asked.

"With Riddell," Cole agreed. "Tige Parker is dead." He stared at the slowly dropping moon. Now he wished for darkness to hide them. But by the time it was set, dawn would begin to break.

"Maybe Shorty and Mullan will come," Myra said. She fired again.

"Anybody riding either one of these trails would make a perfect target from up on those rocks," Cole said. "And we won't be much better off when daylight comes."

## XVII

COLE PEERED through the waning moonlight, sizing up the situation. There was no chance of storming the gut; the configuration of the land stopped that. He let his eyes roam

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from the gut north, along the shale slope to where it dropped into a forest of spruce. Tige had said that was the way to come into the canyon from the rear. And, as Cole remembered from ten years back, Tige told the truth.

Cole stretched his lips in a mirthless grin. If things had gone according to the raider's plans, slipping into the canyon the back way would have been walking into a trap. But with only two of them now, and with both on top of the gut, there could be no trap set!

Cole glanced toward Julio. The old man's face was drawn, grayish under the olive hue of his skin. But his dark eyes snapped with life, and his hand was steady on the trigger of his carbine.

"How long can you hold out, *amigo*?" Cole asked.

"If I had some of that brandy in my saddlebags, a very long time, Señor Cole."

Cole glanced across the trail. The horses were there, hunting for grass in the rocks. He turned to Myra. "And you?"

She brushed a hand across her face as though to wipe away her weariness. "As long as I have to," she said.

A shot screamed over Cole's head. He held his return fire. "If you two can shoot fast enough, keep them off balance, I can get across the trail and go up the shale slide."

Myra stared at the barren ground. "They'll see you there!"

"That shoulder of rock where the slide meets the gut will give me some protection," he answered. "And once I get across, I can come in behind them."

Myra's weary nod told Cole just how desperate she regarded their position. Had she thought they had a chance once daylight came, she would have put up more of an argument, he knew. He crawled to the side of the hollow.

"Ready," he said quietly.

A bullet whined off rock near Julio's head. Another whistled to one side of Myra. Both answered the shots, sending a sweep of lead in a short arc that covered the rocks at the top of the gut. Cole drove himself up the side of the hollow and onto the trail. He was halfway across before he was discovered. A ricocheting bullet slashed across his shoulder,

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tearing at his shirt and scorching his skin. Deliberately, he threw up his arms and staggered as if he had been badly hit. He plunged over the far edge of the trail and into the rocks there.

Above the steady cracking of carbines, he heard Myra's tense voice, "Cole?"

"All right," he called back softly. "Watch for a horse coming." He wriggled through the rocks to Julio's horse and then, still crouching, led it to the edge of the trail. If Chad and Riddell noticed the movement of the animal, they did not seem to connect it with Cole. Their sporadic fire was all directed at the hollow.

He headed the horse for the other side of the trail and lashed it across the flank. The startled animal sprang up and plunged toward the hollow. It was halfway down the shallow slope before it tried to turn and scramble away. Cole saw its head go down as a hand caught the reins. In a moment, the horse came flying back, neighing as a bullet ticked its mane. Now, Cole saw with satisfaction, it no longer carried Julio's saddlebags.

Wishing for a drink of that brandy himself, he squirmed through the rocks to the foot of the shale slide. Dawn was reaching threatening fingers out of the east as he surveyed the barren slope of loose rock. A thin, pale line showed where it had been crossed before, a makeshift trail a good thirty feet above Cole.

He started up, angling so that he could find some purchase for his boots. Each step he had to force his weight down on his leg to dig into the loose rock. His wound began to protest, and by the time he reached the thin line marking the trail, he knew he had to stop and rest. He stepped forward to a more solid looking spot. The footing began to slide and he threw himself upward, digging in with his boots, scrabbling through the shale with both hands for a fingerhold. He found it and clung, almost spread-eagled against the sharp, cold edges of the shale.

The sound he had dreaded came—a shout of discovery from the gut. A rifle cracked but the bullet whined high

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over his head. As he had hoped, the shoulder where the slide met the gut was protecting him. Then Julio cried a warning. Cole twisted his head enough to catch a glimpse of Riddell easing himself onto the shoulder, lifting his handgun, taking his bead.

Cole glanced toward the hollow. Both Julio and Myra were at a bad angle to pick off Riddell. Sucking in his breath, Cole pulled one hand free and drew his .44 awkwardly. He threw himself around, toward Riddell, digging his feet into the slipping shale, swinging his left arm wildly to maintain some kind of balance. At the instant his back slapped against the slope, he fired.

Riddell threw up his arms, teetered on the edge of the shoulder, and then slid face forward, down and out of Cole's range of vision.

Cole tried to turn around with the same flipping motion he had used a moment before. Both feet slipped as he landed, facing north. He began to run wildly in an effort to keep from plunging to the base of the slide. His forward momentum fought the downward pull and suddenly he was staggering into the stand of spruce that marked the end of the slide.

He fell and lay for some time, feeling the throb of his wound drumming angrily through his tired body. He became aware suddenly that the firing had stopped. That could mean Chad had run out of ammunition, or that he was trying to lure Myra and Julio into the open. Or it could mean that he understood Cole's intent and even now was setting a trap in the canyon.

There was one way to find out. Gun in hand, Cole rose and limped through the trees to the end of the canyon. From here deer tracks ran down through the timber that flowed wave on wave north to the alkali sink. And already it was faintly visible in the gray dawn light.

The canyon was narrow, no more than six feet wide until the overhang was reached at the far end. There it spread out to provide room enough for a small plot of grass, a tiny spring, and the overhang itself. The top of that, Cole re-

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membered, went on to form the top of the near side of the gut.

As he moved forward, he could see wisps of smoke curling from a fire built at the edge of the overhang. Two horses, Chad's sorrel and a bay, cropped grass on the small plot. And now Cole saw Chad. He had crawled to the edge of the overhang and was poised there as if to drop on the back of the sorrel.

Surprise held Cole. What had happened that Chad would choose to run? Then anger surged up at the thought of Chad getting away, riding over Gunsight Pass and into the safety of California. Cole lifted his gun and then let it fall. The distance was too great for a forty-four. He began to limp forward, stumbling over the rough canyon bottom.

He saw Chad drop onto the sorrel's back. But instead of riding for the mouth of the canyon, Chad caught the reins of the bay and looped them around the saddle horn. He lifted his own reins and slashed the animal viciously across the rump. The bay neighed shrilly and leaped forward, pounding straight down the narrow canyon for Cole.

His own eagerness had trapped him, Cole realized. He darted toward the canyon wall on his left, hoping that the horse would find room to run past him. A carbine bullet struck the rock above his head, forcing him away and into the path of the frightened horse.

He leaped to the other side of the canyon and flattened himself against the wall there. The bay hammered by, one swinging stirrup crashing against Cole's shoulder, numbing it. He went to one knee.

As he rose, he saw Chad driving for him, guiding the sorrel with his knees, taking a sight with his carbine. Cole stood his ground, his .44 hanging from his right hand. His wounded leg trembled under the tautness of his muscles. When Chad made that final, tiny correction in the angle of the gun barrel, Cole leaped sideways, to the middle of the canyon.

Chad's bullet slashed into the ground where Cole had been standing. And now the sorrel had brought Chad within

thirty feet of his target. He twisted in the saddle to bring Cole in line again with his sights.

Cole moved his shoulders as if to leap back where he had been. Chad swiveled the gun in that direction. Cole brought his arm up in a blindingly fast movement and fired. His forty-four hammered twice, the echoes battering his ears in the narrow canyon.

Chad's gun clattered to the canyon floor. For a long moment he stayed upright in the saddle as though the bullets had missed him. Then he began to slide to the right. The weight of his heavy body dragged him down and out of the saddle. He fell, one foot twisted in its stirrup. The sorrel bucked and began to run, dragging Chad's body alongside it.

Cole caught the horse's bridle as it went by. He jerked the big animal to a stop. Stepping around it, he looked somberly down at Chad's battered form. Slowly, he lifted Chad to the saddle, laying him belly down across it. Using Chad's rope, he lashed the body tightly, picked up the reins and swung the sorrel around. Still slowly, he walked up the canyon and onto the trail, leading the horse.

As he came through the gut, he saw a cluster of horses and heard the voices of Mullan and Shorty French. Myra cried, "Cole!" and came stumbling toward him. He dropped the sorrel's reins and went to the ground. He stayed there, his bad leg thrust out in front of him.

Myra went down on her knees beside him and he felt her arms and the warmth of her tears. Footsteps sounded and Cole looked over Myra's shoulder into the cold, tired expression of Sheriff Mullan.

"You're a little late," Cole said. "It's all over. I couldn't take time to wait around for the law."

"I deserved that," Mullan said quietly. "On the way here I talked to Nito, and a minute ago to Myra."

Shorty French's voice rose raucously, cutting off Cole's reply: "Easy with him, boys!" He and his men came out of the hollow, packing Julio carefully. They had put a makeshift splint on his broken leg and he was looking at it admiringly.

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Mullan made an effort to grin. "Much more carrying on like this and we'll have to build us a hospital in Gunsight."

A frown tinged with sadness wiped away the grin. "Myra told me about Allie. The crazy kid!"

"There wasn't much kid left in him when he charged Horneman," Cole said. Reaching out, he drew Myra's face against his shoulder. "None at all, I'd say," he added softly.